

The best start for young Londoners

Strengthening London's early years education offer following the Covid-19 pandemic





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Foreword

We share the government's ambition to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life and no child is left behind. London boroughs and early years providers have worked hard to ensure that early years education in London helps to reduce inequalities, particularly through delivery of the early years entitlements, but we have real concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic will have a significant impact on reversing these efforts.

London's success in achieving the smallest gap in attainment between children eligible for Free School Meals and their peers at GCSE is well documented. However, it is important that we recognise the work that early years education does in laying the groundwork for schools to continue to level up outcomes.

Early education can prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds from having to start school behind their better off peers, helping to close the disadvantage attainment gap early. Without this work schools would have a far greater job to do in terms of reducing inequalities.

The growth and development that a child undergoes in the first few years of its life is vital to their long-term outcomes, which the government has recognised in its support for the entitlements to free early education and childcare for eligible children.

Early years education, including home learning activity, improves children's cognitive, social and fine motor skills. It builds their understanding of the world around them, setting them up to be ready for school. This is about more than school readiness. Early education experiences improve life chances.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on access to and take up of early years provision, which is putting the delivery of the early years entitlements in London at risk. We are very concerned that the pandemic risks undoing years of progress in improving outcomes for young Londoners and closing the attainment gap.

In addition to this, a shortage of childcare can hinder the ability of parents to access work, which would be detrimental to London's economic recovery in the wake of Covid-19.

Early years provision plays a vital role in London's social and economic recovery. We want to work with the government to take action now to prevent a longer term reduction in provision and take up of early years places – which would threaten many young Londoners' development with potential long lasting effects.

Cllr Elizabeth Campbell
London Councils' Executive Member for Children and Schools

Executive summary



London boroughs have considerable concerns about children being left behind because they have missed out on the government's early years education entitlements for an extended period during the Covid-19 pandemic. The damaging effects of a lack of early education could be even longer lasting on generations of children to come if there is a reduction in the capacity of the sector in the mid to long term.

Providers are facing a significant loss of private income and the decision to calculate early years entitlement funding for the 2021 Spring term on the basis of the January 2021 census while the sector faces a significant drop in demand will be hugely disruptive. This, on top of long-standing financial challenges, has caused serious concerns among London boroughs about the future of the early years sector and how this will affect access to vital high-quality early years education in the coming years.

High quality early years education supports children's long-term development and sets children up to be ready for school. It plays a vital role in aiding cognitive, social and behavioural development, improving early language skills and their understanding of the world.

Yet where early gaps in school readiness develop, they can follow children through their school years, hindering longer term efforts to improve outcomes – attainment gaps that open up before schooling begins continue to widen throughout the school years.ⁱ Children with early education experiences are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes compared with those who had not.^{ii iii}

Without intervention to ensure children and families can access early years education and activities when and where they need it, young Londoners are at

risk of losing key support for their development at a crucial point in their young lives – with long term implications for their attainment and outcomes.

The pandemic has the potential to widen entrenched disadvantage by reducing access to early years provision as well as take up.

The gap in attainment between some children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better off peers is evident when they are as young as 5 years old. If fewer children access early years education, primary schools will have to provide more support to address any gaps in school readiness. Primary schools are under considerable pressure at present to help existing pupils to catch up on lost learning due to Covid-19 and the shift to remote education for many months during the pandemic. Without the support of early years education to ensure school readiness for many future pupils, primary schools will have to bear the brunt of additional challenges for years to come, which is likely to have a considerable impact on the attainment gap in London.

Take up of places for disadvantaged 2 year olds is a particular concern for London boroughs – London has had historically low levels of take up and the pandemic is expected to reduce this further. Increased take up of the 2 year old offer would result in more children in London benefitting from early years education, which is a cornerstone of the government’s ambition to promote social mobility, reduce the word gap in the early years, and improve school readiness amongst the most disadvantaged children.

Home learning plays a key role in supporting children’s development too. With take-up of early years places being much lower due to the pandemic, the role of home learning

activity and organised activities involving parents and children become ever more important. Weaving chat, play and reading together into everyday tasks can turn the home into a learning environment and can help set children up for school. But the capacity to take part in such activities varies among parents. Parents and carers should have access to support and organised activities to aid home learning.

All children and families, including those with different needs, should be able to access a place at a high-quality local early years provider. Maintained nursery schools—valued for their quality and particularly for the places they provide for disadvantaged children and those with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND)—face an uncertain future unless the government commits to a long-term funding solution.

London needs enough high quality, accessible early years provision in the right places. But with the early years sector facing significant instability, boroughs are concerned about the potential closure of smaller providers, leaving communities without access to local provision when they need it.

Any gaps in access to early years provision and reduction of take up, especially in areas with higher levels of deprivation, can be damaging to children’s life chances, holding back their attainment and outcomes at school and beyond.

In these extraordinary circumstances, we urge the government to support the early years sector to continue to deliver vital early years education and childcare that is key to supporting children’s development and ensure that no child is left behind.

To ensure that all young Londoners, regardless of their background or where they live, can access high-quality early years provision and the support they need to thrive, London Councils proposes a 5 point plan:

- 1. Central government to ensure there is sufficient interim funding to protect the sector from the impact of Covid-19**
 - putting in place a Minimum Funding Guarantee based on the January 2020 headcount for 2020-21 and 2021-22 funding allocations to protect early years settings that are currently experiencing reduced demand due to Covid-19.
- 2. Central government to devolve unspent allowances for the disadvantaged 2 year old entitlement to local authorities**
 - to be used to deliver localised targeted face to face outreach work required to encourage greater take up of early years places amongst the most disadvantaged families to level up outcomes.
- 3. Central government to allocate unspent funding from the tax-free childcare allowances to local authorities**
 - to undertake a co-ordinated campaign and localised activities to encourage and enable take up of early years places and parent-child activities to support parents with home learning.
- 4. Central government to guarantee long term funding for Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS)**
 - set at a sustainable level that covers costs and is responsive to changes in local demand to prevent loss of quality places for children.
- 5. London Councils and London local authorities to promote the benefits of early years education to families**
 - to restore parental confidence in taking up places and to enable parental engagement in early years learning at home.



1. Introduction

London's early years sector provides valuable early years education and support to prepare children for school.

During the Covid-19 lockdown in summer 2020, the importance of early years services became even more evident when childcare providers were asked by the government to remain open to support key workers and vulnerable children. However, closures during lockdown and low levels of demand across the capital as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a significant reduction in income, which could cause widespread nursery closures across London without intervention. There is a risk of communities not being able to access early years education with damaging knock on effects on children's attainment and outcomes down the line.

London Councils undertook a survey of London borough Heads of Early Years to investigate the key issues relating to early years and childcare across the capital. 26 boroughs completed the survey in September and October 2020. Focus groups were held in November and December 2020.

This report outlines our concerns about the sustainability of the early years and childcare sector following the Covid-19 lockdown. It sets out the early years provision London needs to ensure every young Londoner has the best possible start, and how the government can work with local authorities to support the delivery and take up of early years education in London.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a great deal of uncertainty for the early years sector which is putting delivery and take up of the early years entitlements in London at risk – entitlements that are funded by the government to support children's development and prepare them for school,

to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, and to help parents manage childcare costs, supporting them into work.

During the pandemic concerns about safety have had an impact on parental confidence and take up of places. Support from local, regional and central government for the sector is going to be crucial as the country recovers. **Any reduction in the capacity of the sector to deliver high quality, accessible provision in the medium to long term would be damaging to the educational attainment and life chances of young Londoners unable to benefit from early years education, as well as restricting parental employment opportunities.**

Early years provision in London

At the start of the 2020, there were over 10,400 early years providers in London. This includes Private, Voluntary and Independent settings (PVIIs), Maintained Nursery Schools and nurseries attached to primary schools. The PVI sector varies considerably in terms of size of provision, ranging from individual childminders and small single-site providers, to medium and large chain nurseries. 96% of children are attending early years providers rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding.^{iv}

Early years settings are funded in part through fees paid by parents and funding from the Department for Education (DfE), through the Early Years Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant, to cover three types of entitlement to free early education and childcare:

- the disadvantage entitlement: 15 hours per week for disadvantaged 2 year olds
- the universal entitlement: 15 hours per week for all 3 and 4 year olds
- the extended entitlement: an additional 15 hours per week for 3 and 4 year olds with eligible working parents.

2. Children's early development: why it's so important



The early childhood years are a vital period of growth and development.

Simple, fun activities like chat, play and reading together have the power to help children to build their cognitive, social and fine motor skills. Early years education, including home learning activity, supports a child's progress improving their early language skills and their understanding of the world. Parents, carers and early years practitioners have a fundamental role in preparing children for school. Studies have shown that quality early years education is vital in supporting children's long-term development.^v

Human contact and interaction are crucial to early healthy development; remote contact and learning experiences cannot replace this. In survey responses, boroughs noted that it is too early to have a full understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on young children.

Yet many boroughs have concerns for those children deprived of early education for an extended period, and the impact this may have on children's personal, social and emotional development and wellbeing.

This was echoed in findings of an Ofsted study of provider concerns in October 2020.^{vi} During the first lockdown, parents who were able to spend more time talking to and reading with their children had a positive impact on children's communication and language skills, yet, many parents had experienced additional pressures making it difficult for them to do this.^{vii} Many in the early years sector have expressed concerns about Covid-19 having a bigger impact on children from the most disadvantaged families or those with additional needs.^{viii}

The Disadvantage Attainment Gap

Early years education has a positive impact on the lives of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and can improve their wellbeing and educational attainment later in life. The Department for Education (DfE) set up the disadvantage and universal early years entitlements to support children's development, preparing them for school and closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Longitudinal studies have found that children with early education experiences are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes compared with those who had not.^{ix x}

However, there remains a gap in attainment between some children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better off peers which is evident when they are as young as 5 years old. In London, in 2018/19, only 63% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) achieved at least the expected level across early learning goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, measured at age 5, compared to 75% for pupils who are not eligible for FSM.^{xi} Attainment gaps that open up before schooling begins continue to widen throughout the school years.^{xii} Education Policy Institute research found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds¹ were over 4 months of learning behind their peers in reception year. This gap increases to 9 months by the end of primary school and 18 months by the time they take their GCSEs.^{xiii}

Boroughs have raised considerable concerns about children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind having missed out on vital early years education – losing key support for their development at a crucial point in their young lives with long term implications for their attainment and outcomes.

Going forward, if fewer children access early years education, primary schools will have to provide more support to address any gaps in school readiness in reception year and beyond. As research shows, the lack of early education has an impact on longer term outcomes and places a burden on schools to address down the line. And many children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not catch up with their peers, some falling further behind throughout their school years.

¹ Those who were eligible for free school meals at any point in the six years leading up to and including 2018/19.

3. Financial challenges – old and new



The Covid-19 pandemic created a host of challenges for the early years sector. These, on top of long-standing financial challenges, have caused serious concerns among London boroughs about the future of the early years sector and how this will affect access to vital high-quality early years education in the coming years.

3.1 Long standing pressures

The early years sector has faced several financial challenges for a number of years:

- The funding rate for the 30-hour entitlement does not fully cover costs, especially for providing places for children with special educational need or disability (SEND).
- The funding rate for disadvantaged 2 year old places does not reflect the additional cost of providing these places with the required higher adult to child ratios. For example, in one borough the rate for 2 year olds is £5.74 and the ratio is 1 adult to 4 children, 3 and 4 year old funding is £4.87

for a staff ratio of 1 to 8. Additionally, extra funding that is available for 3 and 4 year olds, such as the Early Years Pupil Premium and the Disability Access Fund, is not available for 2 year olds.

- Maintained Nursery Schools are an integral part of London’s early years sector, particularly for provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with SEND. Maintained Nursery Schools have received supplementary funding on top of Early Years National Funding Formula allocations to protect their funding for the 15 hours universal entitlement at 2016/17 levels but are not guaranteed to receive sufficient funding to continue operating after August 2021.

In April 2020, funding rates for the early years sector increased by 8p. The Early Years Alliance noted that this equated to, on average, less than a 2% increase in funding at a time where national living and minimum wage requirements were increasing by around 6%.^{xiv}

3.2 The Covid-19 lockdown and low take up

London Councils has serious concerns about the future sustainability of early years settings following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sector. During the Covid-19 lockdown in Summer 2020, demand was understandably reduced. Early years settings were able to access some government support, including furloughing staff and funding for early education entitlements based on attendance levels in January 2020, thereby enabling the majority of settings to continue to operate. However, providers faced significant loss of income from fee-paying parents leaving many providers with an uncertain future.

The Early Years Alliance (EYA) is reporting that 26% of the London providers it surveyed in May 2020 thought it is unlikely that they will still be operational in a year's time^{vi} and boroughs are reporting similar concerns. When London Councils surveyed boroughs in September 2020, 20 boroughs reported that many providers are concerned about future sustainability, particularly smaller providers serving more disadvantaged communities. One borough found that 60% of providers have accrued debts as a consequence of Covid-19, 69% expect to operate at a loss over the next 6 months, and 51% are considering redundancies.

By early September, the majority of settings had reopened, however, boroughs have concerns that take-up will not return to pre-lockdown levels in the short to medium term. For many parents, such as those who have become unemployed or are working fewer hours, they may no longer be able to afford childcare fees or now feel that they can provide their own childcare. Fewer parents

in work also means fewer children would be eligible for the full 30 hours entitlement, further reducing demand. Anxiety about Covid-19 will undoubtedly be a factor and it may take several months for parents to feel comfortable with taking up childcare places. This uncertainty could extend well into 2021.

The government's announcement that funding for the Early Years Dedicated Schools Grant (EYDSG) allocations for the 2021 Spring term will be adjusted and based on the January 2021 census while the sector faces a significant drop in demand will be hugely disruptive. While we welcome the guidance that allows providers to record temporary absences, this does not protect against the drop in funding providers will see due the lower take up of places by parents who have withdrawn or reduced hours and those who are delaying taking up places. It is highly likely that significant numbers of children who would normally take up a place will not be on roll by 21 January 2021 because of the pandemic. With the country in lockdown; more parents working from home, on furlough or unemployed; and anxieties around the new variant of Covid-19, it is not surprising that most early years settings have seen a considerable drop in demand for places.

Where headcounts are lower than pre-pandemic levels, local authorities will now have to reduce funding to providers for free early education entitlements at a time when other income streams, such as paid for places, are also likely to be significantly reduced. These financial pressures could cause widespread closures of early years settings across London, where high rents and overheads may lead to smaller settings no longer being sustainable unless contingency funding is urgently made available.

If Covid-19 has such a detrimental impact on the early years settings leading to the closure of many nurseries, as the Early Years Alliance is predicting, then this could have an extremely negative impact on child development and school readiness in affected areas.

Boroughs raised concerns about the loss of flexible, affordable providers, particularly in areas with higher levels of deprivation. This could have a considerable impact in terms of widening inequalities if children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less able to access early education – holding back their development and leaving them at risk of falling behind their peers.

It will be important for the government to support the sector financially through uncertain times to ensure that there are sufficient places available locally for children when they need them.

Local support for providers

21 out of 26 boroughs told us that providers were raising concerns about cashflow. Boroughs have been supporting local providers in a number of ways, including:

- Regular contact with providers to keep the sector informed of updates including grant opportunities and clear information about funding and what is expected
- One to one business support and business continuity planning
- Early payment of funding for entitlements where possible
- Rent holidays for provision in local authority sites
- Free virtual / online training for staff on topics raised by providers such as emotional wellbeing and dealing with bereavement
- Free resources for vulnerable children and children with SEND
- Ongoing messages to parents about importance of early years education to encourage take up.

4. What London needs: looking forward to the best start



High quality early years provision aids children’s cognitive, social and behavioural development, improving early language skills and their understanding of the world. Early education plays a fundamental role in setting children up successfully to be ready for school – to thrive and meet their full potential.

For children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, early years education reduces the likelihood of them beginning their school years behind better off peers who have achieved expected levels across early learning goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile at age 5.

Children and families need local high-quality provision that is flexible, accessible and affordable. All children, including those with different needs, should be able to access a place at a high-quality local provider. But without an uninterrupted offer of places across London from a sustainable early years sector—and equal access for all communities—along with promotion of the benefits of early years education to counter

the effects of the pandemic on parental confidence and take up, too many young Londoners will miss out on vital support.

4.1 Enough places in the right places

The financial challenges facing the early years sector are likely to continue beyond the next six months. Young Londoners need high-quality, accessible, flexible, local provision but with the sector facing significant instability, boroughs are concerned about loss of providers leading to gaps in provision for some neighbourhoods.

Parents and carers need access to local provision that is close to home, or work. The National Audit Office’s national review in 2019 found that some local authorities reported falling numbers of places for the disadvantaged 2 year old entitlement and fewer providers in deprived areas. London boroughs shared concerns about access to places in deprived areas in the survey. Officers had significant concerns about the closure of smaller providers serving disadvantaged communities. This could

leave communities without access to local, affordable provision when they need it – denying children who are at risk of having poorer outcomes the crucial early years education and support they need to thrive.

4.2 A localised approach to improve access for disadvantaged children

High quality early years education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds plays a major role in closing attainment gaps and promoting social mobility. Yet some of the most disadvantaged children who stand to gain from contact time with early years practitioners are losing out on this vital support.

London has had historically low levels of take up of places for disadvantaged 2 year olds and the boroughs are concerned that these numbers will reduce further due to parental concerns about Covid-19. In January 2020, only 59% of eligible two-year-olds in London accessed their free 15-hours of early education, compared to 69% nationally.^{xvi} Take up varies significantly across London boroughs linked to a variety of factors including disadvantage, employment status, ethnicity, SEND, population mobility and English as an additional language. Some parents cannot afford additional charges that are not covered by entitlements. The DfE suggests that London's pattern of take up differs to other culturally diverse cities in England due to the super-diversity of the population and higher level of population mobility.^{xvii}

Increasing awareness and understanding of free entitlements play a significant role in encouraging parents to take up the 2 year old childcare offer. In the survey, boroughs told us about local marketing campaigns they ran

over the summer to allay parents' fears and promote the importance of early education, including letters to residents, parental and practitioner webinars, and messages via parent champions. Local Early Years teams have been working with social care teams to check whether vulnerable children were taking up their provision and have supported social workers in helping parents to access places. Boroughs understand what local communities need and are best placed to lead efforts to increase take up of the entitlements, but they need resources to reach families that are the most disadvantaged, who are less able to access entitlements without substantial support and direction.

4.3 Parent-child activities and supporting home learning

With much lower levels of take-up of early years places due to the pandemic, the role of home learning activity and organised activities involving parents and children has become more important. Parents and carers can engage in a variety of simple and fun activities that support their child's early learning. Weaving chat, play and reading together into everyday tasks can turn the home into a learning environment and can help set children up for school.

Some parents and carers will inevitably choose to delay formal early education until their child is older than 2.^{xviii} Reasons behind this decision include parents not needing childcare due to not being in work or having childcare provided by a relative; concerns about quality, sufficiency and flexibility of provision; parents wanting to teach children about their culture, religion or language; parents being uncomfortable with their child being in early years provision before they can talk about their experiences and before they

are potty trained; and parents not seeing the value of early years education or feeling that they could better (or equally) support their child's development.

DfE research found significant positive effects of Stay and Play and other organised activities on children's physical and personal, social, and emotional development as well as improvements in the home learning environment.^{xix} Benefits for parents and carers included improved parenting skills, greater knowledge of child development, increased confidence in parenting and improved health for mothers.^{xx} However, many of these activities have not been accessible since lockdown. Reduction or loss of these services can leave parents without access to support for home learning and informal opportunities to learn and benefit from face to face contact with early years professionals.

Encouraging parents to undertake simple, fun activities in a positive and judgement-free way is an important part of supporting the home learning environment. During the lockdown in summer 2020, boroughs found that some parents who were aware of home learning activities were less able to engage in these positive learning experiences as they lacked the headspace and capacity to see the activities as being a natural part of everyday tasks. Local authorities want to support informal opportunities to help parents deliver their own early years education but they need resources to be able to champion existing opportunities, as well as grow new initiatives.

4.4 Stability for Maintained Nursery Schools

Valued for their quality, the places they provide for disadvantaged children and those with SEND, and the support they provide to

other settings, Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS) are an integral part of London's early years sector. But MNS are not guaranteed to receive sufficient funding to continue operating after August 2021.

MNS have higher costs than other setting types because they have the legal responsibilities of a primary school and are required to have staff with higher levels of qualification. MNS have received supplementary funding on top of Early Years National Funding Formula allocations since 2017 to protect their funding for the 15 hours universal entitlement at 2016/17 levels. However, they are not guaranteed to receive supplementary funds they need to continue operating after August 2021, and have only unconfirmed allocations for the September 2021 to March 2022 period beyond that.

Local authorities and nurseries cannot plan on the basis of unconfirmed allocations, leaving providers with an uncertain future. MNS need a long-term funding solution that is responsive to local changes in demand. London Councils' survey found that 13 out of the 15 boroughs who responded to the survey and have a least one MNS said that settings would be likely to close if supplementary funding was not extended. Closure of these settings would lead to a significant drop in the number of high-quality places available locally, unless local authorities were able to support the sector to create more places. This is why London Councils has been calling for the government to commit to longer term additional funding for MNS.

5. Our five point plan

In these extraordinary circumstances, we are calling on the government to urgently address the challenges facing the early years sector in London. We need to work together to protect the government's vital early years entitlements and provision that is key to supporting children's early development and ensuring that no child is left behind.

To ensure that all young Londoners, regardless of their background or where they live, can access high-quality early years provision and the support they need to help to level up outcomes, London Councils is proposing a 5 point plan:

1. Central government to ensure there is sufficient interim funding to protect the sector from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

London Councils is calling on the government to put in place a Minimum Funding Guarantee based on the January 2020 headcount for 2020/21 and 2021/22 funding allocations to protect early years settings that are currently experiencing reduced demand due to Covid-19 and ensure families can access early years education when and where they need it.

2. Central government to devolve unspent allowances for disadvantaged 2 year olds to local authorities to increase take up

The funding would be used to drive up take up of places for disadvantaged children through localised approaches. Local authorities are best placed to improve take up as they have a strong understanding of what support the most vulnerable families need to access early years provision, but they need resources to carry out targeted outreach support. Local

authorities could use the funding to pump prime tried and tested outreach efforts that would have an immediate impact in driving up take up of the offer and make sure that no child is left behind.

3. Central government to allocate unspent allowances for tax-free childcare to local authorities to support local early years provision and home learning

This money would be used by local authorities to undertake a co-ordinated campaign and local activities to encourage and enable take up of early years places and parent-child activities to support parents with home learning.

4. Central government to guarantee long term funding for Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS)

London Councils is calling on the government to put in place longer term guaranteed funding for MNS beyond the summer term 2021, set at a sustainable level that covers costs and is responsive to changes in local demand. Without supplementary funding many MNS face an uncertain future.

5. London local government to promote the benefits of early years education to families

London Councils is working with boroughs to identify and promote practice being used to restore parental confidence in taking up places, to drive up take up of the 2 year old offer in particular, and to enable parental engagement in early years learning at home.

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design: pinsentdesign.com
images: iStock
publication date: January 2021