

Supporting Families in the Foundation Years: Proposed Changes to the Entitlement to Free Early Education and Childcare Sufficiency – Family and Parenting Institute consultation response

January 2012

About the Family and Parenting Institute

1. The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is an independent charity that exists to make the UK a better place for families and children. We work with charities, businesses and public services to offer practical help to families. We run campaigns to build a family friendly society. Our research offers insights into family life now and in the future. We work to inform policymakers and public debate and we develop practical resources for people working with families.

Executive summary

2. FPI welcomes the extension of free early education provision to enable the most disadvantaged children to access the benefits of good quality early education from a younger age. A strong educational and developmental start in the early years strongly influences outcomes in later life, with the benefits of good quality early education being especially important for disadvantaged children.
3. For the Family and Parenting Institute, there are four fundamental prerequisites of a family friendly society:
 - A fairer society for families – where economic conditions support family wellbeing, bringing up children and the reduction of poverty for families
 - Family friendly business and working life – where employers and work-life balance supports the wellbeing of families and parents
 - Essential service provision for families and children – where there are high-quality services to support families and children, particularly in the early years of childhood
 - Family friendly infrastructure and living environment – where communities and key services enhance the quality of life for families in their daily lives.
4. We believe that, if implemented, these proposals will be a welcome contribution to meeting the second and third prerequisites, namely family friendly business and working life and providing the services that families and children need.
5. We support the stated preferred option, Option 3: targeted funds with some local authority discretion. We agree that a system based on the introduction of a national entitlement setting out which two year olds as a minimum are to be entitled to free early education provides the best route to securing the policy objectives identified.
6. We also support the proposed approach on eligibility and flexibility, making use of a consistent definition of economic disadvantage and allowing parents and carers wide flexibility on how to make best use of the entitlement to fit round their work and caring responsibilities.

7. We have significant concerns about the apparent change of approach to engagement with parents and carers in the proposed statutory guidance. This risks undermining the success of the free entitlement by preventing parents and carers from having an input into the process. The existing code of practice¹ explicitly highlights the importance of including parents and carers in partnership working around the delivery of the free entitlement and specifically mentions consulting and involving them. The new guidance however makes no reference to partnership working with parents, limiting itself to providing for the provision to parents of information, advice and assistance.
8. We are also concerned at the lack of mention of the importance of the home learning environment and the need for engagement between early learning settings and parents to ensure that parents are supported adequately.

Responses to specific consultation questions

Introduction

9. Research²³ shows that whilst parents and carers have the most impact on children's early development, good quality early years provision can also have a large impact on children's longer term outcomes.
10. Given the recognised impact of parents, supporting them to help them provide a positive home learning environment is a vital part of improving outcomes for children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds⁴. Early years settings have a key role to play in encouraging and supporting parents to provide this environment in the home.
11. We believe that Option 3, of a national entitlement with some local discretion, is the one most likely to achieve the stated objectives. This approach would help ensure the more effective targeting of provision to those children most in need and that local authorities will direct the funding to support the free entitlement.

The revised statutory guidance

12. Consultation Question 1

Does the proposed statutory guidance make clear what local authorities should do to deliver the free early education entitlement and secure sufficient early education and childcare for two, three and four year olds?

13. We are concerned at the apparent change of approach to engagement with parents and carers in the proposed statutory guidance. Whilst we support the reduction of unnecessary regulation, in this instance it would appear that a significant change in approach has taken place as part of the 'streamlining' process, to the detriment of parents and carers.

¹ Code of Practice for Local Authorities on delivery of Free Early years Provision for 3 & 4 year olds (September 2010)

² Smith, R., Purdon, S., Schneider, V., La Valle, I., Wollny, I., Owen, R. and Bryson, C. (2009) 'Early education pilot for two year old children evaluation.

³ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B. (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the early primary year.

⁴ Hunt, S., Virgo, S., Klett-Davies, M., Page, A., and Apps, J. (2011) Provider influence on the home learning environment: Part 1. London: Family and Parenting Institute.

14. Provision for the needs of families in relation to the free entitlement cannot rest just on basic provision of information, advice and assistance in choosing as provider. For a thriving local mixed market, parents and carers must be included as active participants in partnership working.
15. The existing code of practice⁵ emphasises the importance of consulting and including parents and carers in partnership working around the delivery of the free entitlement:
 - Chapter 2: the free entitlement:
 - Under what local authorities should do to secure delivery, it states that this should include consulting with parents about what they want from their flexible free entitlement, on an on-going basis. In the section 'Looking ahead – future policy changes', the code refers (1.8) to local authorities continuing to have an on-going role to consult with parents on this.
 - Key principles – the principles that local authorities should have regard to in planning and managing delivery again include consulting with and listening to parents about how they want to access their free entitlement
 - Chapter 3: flexibility: The section identifying what local authorities should do to ensure flexible delivery states that this should include consulting with parents and involving them in local assessments of demand for flexibility.
 - Chapter 6: delivery in partnership:
 - A key element of the vision set out for a thriving mixed market is embedded strong partnership working between government, local authorities, providers and parents.
 - Under what local authorities should do, this includes regularly engaging with parents and providers to ensure delivery is reflective of parental demand and provider capacity.
 - Detailed guidance is given on partnership delivery of the free entitlement, involving partnerships at 4 levels, including between providers and parents and local authorities and parents.
 - The section on local authorities consulting with and involving parents gives further helpful guidance on identifying and providing for disadvantaged families.
16. The proposed new statutory guidance by contrast makes no reference to partnership working with parents, limiting itself (in part C) to setting out the basic requirements on providing information, advice and assistance. The additional and more detailed guidance here is helpful it does not compensate for the loss elsewhere of the various elements of partnership working identified in the 2010 code of practice.
17. We would therefore argue that the new guidance must, at a minimum, include specific mention of the need for consultation and partnership working with parents and carers in setting out the fundamentals of what local authorities should do to secure delivery of the free entitlement.
18. We are also concerned that the guidance does not mention the importance of the home learning environment in ensuring successful educational and developmental progress for children. It would be helpful if in the guidance (Part C – Information to parents); the list at C.2 included making parents aware of the importance of supporting their children's learning and development in the home. Without supporting activity in the home the benefits of taking up the proposed free entitlement will be undermined.

⁵ Code of Practice for Local Authorities on delivery of Free Early years Provision for 3 & 4 year olds (September 2010)

Eligibility

19. Question 2

Should eligibility for the two year old entitlement, to be set out in regulations, be based upon the criteria (set out in paragraph 4.4) used to identify which school-age children are entitled to free school meals?

We agree with this proposal as being a useful way, using a well understood measure, to identify those children facing economic and connected educational disadvantage and with the inclusion of looked after children, on the basis that they face similar levels of disadvantage. Please see answer to Question 4 on the identification in guidance of further groups that should be given priority consideration. It is important to recognise, however, that such targeting needs to be backed up by effective measures to support uptake, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged families.

20. Question 4

Do you support the setting out in guidance of further groups of children, beyond those given a legal entitlement in regulations, who should be given priority consideration for free early education at age two?

We support this proposal as giving local authorities the flexibility to offer places, where available to other groups of children suffering from or at risk of educational disadvantage. The active use of such discretion will be particularly important if early intervention is to be successful. We would suggest that whilst it would be helpful to identify certain other priority groups, such as those with special educational needs, the guidance should not preclude the use of local discretion to include other children where these have been identified as in need by e.g. health visitors or children's centre professional staff.

Flexibility and take up

21. Questions 12 and 13

Do you support the proposal that free entitlement hours could be taken between 7am and 7pm (rather than between 8am and 6pm as currently)? Do you support the proposal to allow the free entitlement to be taken over two days per week rather than three days?

Parents are more than ever under pressure to balance their caring and work responsibilities. We therefore support the proposal to increase the flexibility of the free entitlement, as step towards enabling families to better balance these commitments. It may also enable some parents to consider returning to work.

22. Question 14

Would you like to see any other changes in the statutory guidance in order to improve take up and/or flexibility?

As outlined in our response to Q1, we would want to see reference to consultation and partnership work with parents and carers reinstated in the guidance. We believe that regular and meaningful engagement with parents will improve take up of the offer,

particularly amongst more disadvantaged families who tend to have a more negative view of the availability, quality and affordability of local childcare provision⁶.

23. Question 15

Should the same flexibility requirements apply to the two year old entitlement?

On balance we support this proposal. However, we do have some concern that allowing the entitlement to be taken over two days rather than three, with a maximum session time cap of ten hours may lead to more children being at settings for long periods of time. Whilst this may be a better solution for meeting working commitments we would question whether lengthy sessions of this nature on a regular basis would benefit the education and development of the children concerned. In feedback from parents gathered as part of preparing this response, one parent highlighted the possible impact in terms of tiredness and possible stress, particularly on the youngest children, of long sessions.

Implementation

24. Question 20

Do you support the proposal that local authorities should prepare and publish an annual report on the sufficiency of childcare?

Yes. This would provide a useful way to help enable families to monitor provision of the free entitlement at a local level and identify any gaps in provision. However, the report should also cover quality. The evidence is that to achieve significant benefit, the early education must at a minimum be of good quality. Local reporting must therefore offer information on this aspect to enable parents to assess local provision. This is particularly important given reported variations in provision between different local authority areas.

25. Question 23

Are there further steps you believe the Government should take to ensure that parents have good information on their entitlements and choices?

We welcome the progress made on offering a variety of key information to parents through a wider range of methods, including: Family Information Service; health visitors and children's centres, national partner arrangements and the foundation years website. However, it will be important to ensure the differing information needs and approaches of different types of families are reflected in provision at a local level. In particular, research shows that families experiencing the highest levels of multiple disadvantage tend to receive information on childcare from different sources than families in better circumstances, being more likely to receive it from JobCentres and JobCentre Plus⁷. Local authorities need to take this into account in ensuring that adequate information is available in their local area.

⁶ Families experiencing multiple disadvantage: their use and views on childcare provision, DCSF research report RR191 (2010)

⁷ Families experiencing multiple disadvantage: their use and views on childcare provision, DCSF research report RR191 (2010)

A main element in developing uptake will be ensuring that key information provision sources, such as local Family Information Services are supported, in particular in terms of adequate funding.

It will also be important to make sure that parents and carers are aware of the full range of options available to them, including the use of in-home childcare with a child minder.

26. Targeted efforts are also needed to improve the level of information about childcare amongst families facing multiple disadvantage to address negative impressions, in particular with regard to quality and affordability⁸.

For further information regarding this response, please contact:

Andrew Carruthers
Research and Policy Officer
Family and Parenting Institute

Tel. 020 7424 3481
andrew.carruthers@familyandparenting.org

⁸ Families experiencing multiple disadvantage: their use and views on childcare provision, DCSF research report RR191 (2010)