

Policy and Politics

Shortage of high quality childcare could hamper rollout of free places for disadvantaged two-year-olds

Catherine Gaunt, 01 July 2011, 1:15pm

Finding sufficient high quality childcare to expand free early education to all disadvantaged two-year-olds by 2013 could be problematic, research into the free entitlement suggests.



Little Learners in Skegness, an outstanding setting and Nursery World's Nursery of the Year 2010, took part in the two-year-olds pilot

Previous research has found that childcare in disadvantaged areas tends to be of a lower quality than in more affluent parts of the country.

Working with health visitors and other professionals, local authorities should also use birth data to draw up a comprehensive list of children in their area who would be eligible for the offer before they turn two, in order to target free places for disadvantaged two-year-olds more effectively.

The Government-commissioned study, *Rolling out free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds: an implementation study for local authorities and providers*, by the NCB and the National Centre for Social Research, said that in future the Department for Education may need to consider 'how much variation in quality would be acceptable' and whether providers delivering the free offer should follow national guidelines.

The study also found that in areas where childcare demand and childcare costs were high, it was sometimes difficult to find enough early years providers to offer the free places, even at current funding levels. However, where childcare costs and demand for childcare were low, the offer provided an important source of funding and could play an important role in ensuring the sustainability of some providers.

The research team visited eight local authority areas that are already offering the free entitlement for two-year-olds, and interviewed local authority staff and childcare providers, including children's centres, nurseries, pre-schools and childminders.

The report said that local authorities were keen to ensure that the offer for two-year-olds was of high quality, but that 'as the programme is scaled up, it could prove challenging to find enough settings of sufficient high quality.'

It said that because Ofsted inspections only happen on average every three years, Ofsted ratings were not seen as sufficient to assess the quality of providers and local authorities were relying on a range of different quality assurance schemes.

The study suggests that as the programme is expanded to more areas, the DfE might want to produce a list of approved quality schemes or define criteria that such schemes must meet.

The study also says that as the number of free places for two-year-olds expands, nurseries with limited experience of providing childcare for vulnerable families will need training to ensure that they are able to offer places for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

'Funding must cover costs'

The National Day Nurseries Association said that the report highlighted how it was that places for disadvantaged two-year-olds are adequately funded, and that private and voluntary sector nurseries had the skills to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds.



Chief executive Purnima Tanuku said, 'With current funding issues in all sectors, we absolutely must ensure that funding covers costs so that there can be a diverse, high-quality mix of provision delivering the offer. This is especially critical now funding for two-year-olds is part of the Early Intervention Grant and is therefore not ringfenced.'

She added, 'While we welcome how the report stresses the willingness of providers to be flexible and

their understanding of the value of an offer, we fear that unless local authorities ensure it is sustainable there will not be enough provision to meet the needs of all disadvantaged two-year-olds.

'Nurseries are fully committed to the value of free places, but with current funding issues, simply could not afford to deliver these unless they are assured that funding will cover costs. As part of this, it is important to understand related costs, such as training for staff in supporting needy children, time to attend meetings with other professionals and in effective outreach.'

<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/rss/1078132/Shortage-high-quality-childcare-hamper-rollout-free-places-disadvantaged-two-year-olds/>