



Department  
for Education

# **Two-year-olds in schools: a case study of eight schools**

**Research report**

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# 1 Introduction

This report presents a summary of some of the key findings from case study visits to eight schools as part of an implementation study examining what works in developing and delivering provision for two-year-olds in schools. It sits alongside a final report for the implementation study which presents a full range of findings from all research activities which is available on the Department for Education (DfE) website<sup>1</sup>.

The implementation study was designed by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Research Centre<sup>2</sup> in partnership with Frontier Economics<sup>3</sup> on behalf of the Department for Education to examine approaches being taken to develop provision for two-year-olds in 49 schools during the academic year September 2013-July 2014.

The evaluation activities included:

- **Two workshops for participating schools:** the evaluation commenced with a DfE supported day-long workshop in November 2013 that offered all participating schools the opportunity to network and share experiences and learning. A follow-up workshop was held in June 2014 where NCB led a discussion with schools to gain their views on emerging findings from the evaluation.
- **Two online surveys of schools:** schools completed a baseline survey in January/February 2014 and a final survey in June/July 2014. The baseline survey gathered early feedback on schools' approaches to planning and set up of provision for two-year-olds, emerging delivery models, and costs of provision. It also included a number of questions designed to explore what aspects of planning, set up and delivery of provision schools found challenging and, also, in what areas schools would like further information and support.<sup>4</sup> The final survey aimed to build upon this and included questions regarding any changes to provision, staff development needs and parental engagement strategies.
- **A finance survey of schools** administered in June/July 2014 to document the costs schools experienced when developing and delivering provision for two-year-olds.
- **Qualitative case study interviews in eight case study schools:** as outlined further in Section 1.1, interviews and focus groups were held with those who led the provision for two-year-olds and a selection of parents in eight schools.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication\\_filter\\_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication_filter_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/research](http://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/research)

<sup>3</sup> [www.frontier-economics.com](http://www.frontier-economics.com)

<sup>4</sup> For the full baseline survey report please see [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307281/RR348\\_-\\_Two\\_year\\_olds\\_in\\_schools\\_baseline\\_survey.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307281/RR348_-_Two_year_olds_in_schools_baseline_survey.pdf)

Interviews aimed to gain a detailed view of each schools' experience of developing and delivering provision as well as to detail parents' experiences.

- **Practice support for schools:** a key strand of the evaluation is to also provide practice support, in particular from the Early Childhood Unit (ECU)<sup>5</sup> within NCB. ECU developed and shared a self-evaluation tool with schools, based on good practice and research about early years provision, to support schools in developing their provision for two-year-olds<sup>6</sup>; also a short school networking contact guide to direct schools to useful resources and to promote the sharing of learning across all the schools involved in the project.

A full methodology can be found within the final report<sup>7</sup>.

## 1.1 Case study visits

The eight case study schools were purposively selected to represent: different areas of the country; urban and rural settings; different types of organisation and their experience of providing for two-year-olds.<sup>8</sup> Four schools had offered provision for two-year-olds before the demonstration project commenced and four began to deliver from September 2013. Within each school, interviews were carried out with head teachers (or other senior school members leading the provision), lead early years practitioners, finance officers, groups of parents and local authority representatives or school governors.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Report structure

This report presents findings from the eight case study visits and is intended to offer a 'snapshot' of how these schools progressed with their provision for two-year-olds. The report also presents some enablers to providing a good quality offer and a series of helpful pointers to support tackling any barriers or challenges along the way. It is hoped that this material will support other schools or settings that are also providing, or are planning to provide, provision for two-year-olds.

Findings show the different delivery approaches taken by the case study schools, how the schools have engaged and worked with parents, as well as parents' and children's experiences. This report also focuses on sharing experiences and examples of practice drawn from across the eight case study schools. However, it should be noted that the feedback in the report represents individual or school-level findings and should be

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<sup>5</sup> [www.ncb.org.uk/areas-of-activity/early-childhood](http://www.ncb.org.uk/areas-of-activity/early-childhood)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Two-year-olds-in-schools-demonstration-project-6393244/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication\\_filter\\_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication_filter_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education)

<sup>8</sup> School types included two local authority nurseries, two academies, one foundation school, two community schools and one voluntary controlled school. A full breakdown can be found in Table 1.

<sup>9</sup> One interview School F (Finance Officer) was unable to be carried out.

considered alongside evidence-based recommendations of best practice for this age range.

A key area of inquiry in the evaluation was the financial sustainability of provision for two-year-olds within schools. During the case study interviews, the views of school staff were sought concerning the economies of scale of the provision, the availability of capital funding and the financial implications of staffing arrangements and the degree of flexibility possible when offering places.

While other evaluation activities present a view of all participating schools, this report provides detailed examples of individual school's experiences. As such, findings should be regarded as indicative and not necessarily generalisable to all participating schools.

A number of areas within the report are discussed briefly but are reported on fully in the final report.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication\\_filter\\_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications?keywords=&publication_filter_option=research-and-analysis&departments%5B%5D=department-for-education)

## 2 Summary of findings

- **All eight case study schools had developed and implemented provision for two-year-olds.** Of the four schools that had not provided for two-year-olds prior to the demonstration project, many staff and those who led the provision had previous experience of working with two-year-olds in other settings and were able to apply this knowledge and experience to the current school setting.
- Schools varied in their delivery arrangements. **Four schools (Schools B, E, G and H) delivered provision through a nursery within the school** and the set up and delivery of provision was led by a senior member of the school (such as the head teacher). **Schools C and D, both academy schools, provided for two-year-olds through a nursery set up as a subsidiary company of the main school.** The delivery of provision was, to a large extent, led by a nursery manager. The remaining **two schools (Schools A and F) delivered provision in partnership with another setting** on the school site (children's centre, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings). Delivery was led in partnership between a senior member of the school and the manager of the PVI setting/children's centre.
- **Schools drew on a wide range of resources to plan their provision, including the advice and support of the local authority,** which was considered extremely helpful by many schools. Additionally, **a number of schools worked with other local settings/schools** to exchange ideas and share information during the set up phase, which was also considered beneficial. Four case study schools reported that the design, planning and set up of provision took longer than initially anticipated.
- **The models of delivery across schools were highly influenced by the perceived needs of local families, the strategic aims of the school and resources/space available.** This included the number and type of places offered (whether fee-paying, funded or a mixture or both) and when places were offered.
- Across these eight schools, **the numbers of places offered for two-year-olds ranged from 8-34** and all of the **schools described their provision as 'over subscribed'** and working from a waiting list.
- With regard to the make-up of places, **in four of the schools (School E, F, G and H) all places for two-year-olds were funded,** while **three (Schools A, B and C) provided a mixture of fee-paying and funded places. One school (School D) provided all places as fee-paying** and was in the process of introducing funded places.
- **The availability of space was a key consideration for all schools when deciding whether to offer or expand their provision for two-year-olds** and,

clearly, is an important factor to consider with regard to managing the waiting lists reported by all the schools. Six case study schools secured funding for a new building or classroom for the provision since September 2013, allowing some to plan for a slow expansion of numbers.

- **All of the case study schools reported a strong commitment to providing a high quality provision for two-year-olds and considered the environment to be a key aspect of delivering this.** As such, schools spent a good deal of time planning the environment and drew upon external training, consultations with local authority early years consultants, research and experience to deliver a comfortable, safe and stimulating environment for two-year-olds.
- **A mixture of age appropriate structured and free flow activities was considered important by those who led the provision in many schools, who were keen to stress that provision should not be highly structured or ‘school like’.** Schools developed a range of activities to support the learning and development of two-year-olds, which included play, outdoor exploration and free-flow activities. Sessions included a mix of structured activities, such as sitting in small groups, face painting and singing songs, as well as sessions where children explored the outdoor environment and played with others.
- **Interviewees in all schools were keen to stress the importance of high quality staff when providing for two-year-olds** and most were confident their provision was staffed to the highest quality their budget allowed for, achieved through recruiting new staff and up-skilling existing staff. Staffing was considered a key challenge in three schools, including the lack of finance to hire at the level deemed appropriate by the school.
- **A number of schools recruited new staff members and had mixed experiences regarding the quality of new recruits.** Some schools had begun to make links with Further Education Colleges to identify newly qualified staff earlier.
- In terms of **the knowledge and skills required of staff, these included, amongst other things, knowledge of two-year-olds and an understanding of their needs, knowledge of child development and an ability to work effectively with parents.** All schools reported a commitment to support and train staff in these areas, including through regular internal training sessions.
- **All schools demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging and involving parents in their child’s provision.** There was agreement amongst those who led the provision, and local authority representatives, that working with parents was a vital aspect of delivering a high quality provision for two-year-olds. **Schools that provided for a high number of funded two-year-olds carried out home visits** in advance of children attending provision. Such visits were reported to help in the building of a trusting relationship between school staff and parents.

- **Schools worked with parents to help them support their child’s learning and development at home in a number of ways**, for example, by holding a family learning session once a week in the onsite children’s centre (School F). **Some schools included parents in the planning of activities for their child and asked them to contribute to developmental observations when at home.** For example, School H, where parents attended an activity planning session each term.
- **Parents were overwhelming positive about the provision their child attended and the availability of funded places at the school.** Parents interviewed recounted how their children enjoyed attending the provision, had made a close bond with practitioners and benefitted in a number of different ways, for example, in the development of language and social skills.
- **Parents themselves benefited from the provision; some commented that they gained a greater understanding of how to support their child’s learning and development at home, while others highlighted the logistical benefits to having their older and younger children attend the same school, allowing some parents to gain employment.** Parents noted that word of mouth regarding the quality of the setting had been a key reason for them choosing the school provision over other local settings.
- **Financial planning for the set-up of the provision was considered time consuming and had been challenging for a number of the schools.** There were, for example, variations in the availability of capital funding and the amount of start-up grants available to schools, reflecting local allocations of funding. In some cases, there was also a lack of clarity from local authorities surrounding the funding arrangements, including the hourly rates paid and administrative processes.
- **The biggest component of expenditure related to staff costs and it was noted that high and rising staff costs were a significant risk to future financial sustainability,** either due to the need to hire additional staff to maintain or supplement ratios, and/or due to the need to fund salary increases in order to retain high quality staff. The introduction of home visits and other engagement activities with parents also have important financial implications.

## **3 Findings**

### **3.1 Background and context of delivery**

This section presents the background and context of schools' provision for two-year-olds. A brief overview of the eight case study schools, including the type of setting, geographical area, and the number of places offered, is provided in Table 1.

#### **3.1.1 When did schools begin delivering provision for two year-olds?**

Case study schools began delivering provision for two-year-olds at different points:

- Four schools had experience of providing for two-year-olds prior to the demonstration project. Schools A, B and C began providing for two-year-olds between 2004 and 2012, offering fee-paying places or working in partnership with a children's centre or an onsite private, voluntary and independent (PVI) provider. School H began providing in April 2013 for two-year-olds receiving the funded fifteen hours of provision.
- Schools D, E, F and G had not provided for two-year-olds prior to the demonstration project. Three began delivering in September 2013 while School G began in February 2014. Interviewees highlighted that many staff members did, however, have experience of working with two-year-olds in other settings and were able to transfer their knowledge, skills and experience to the school.

**Table 1: Summary of case study schools**

Identifier	School type	When began providing	How many places for two-year-old offered (in May 2014)	Percentage of school pupils eligible for free school meals at any time during the past six years (%)	Percentage of school pupils with English not as a first language (%)
School A	Local Authority Nursery	2004	24 (22 funded)	Not available	Not available
School B	Local Authority Nursery	2012	34 (30 funded)	Not available	Not available
School C	Academy School	2006	15 (8 funded)	44.9	12.0
School D	Academy School	September 2013	16 (all fee-paying)	9.0	0.0*
School E	Community School	February 2014	16 (all funded)	59.2	53.9
School F	Community School	September 2013	8 (all funded)	52.3	77.3
School G	Foundation School	September 2013	16 (all funded)	77.5	6.2
School H	Voluntary Controlled School	April 2013	32 (all funded)	43.5	27.1

Source: statistics on (i) percentage of school pupils eligible for free schools meals and (ii) percentage of school pupils with English not as a first language are taken from the 2014 School and College Performance Tables available on the Department for Education website

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/index.html>. Please note that data was not available for two local authority nurseries. \*In School D, there were fewer than six pupils with English not as a first language which has been expressed as 0%.

### 3.1.2 What were the delivery arrangements and who led the provision?

The approaches to delivery varied across schools to include the following:

- Four schools (Schools B, E, G and H) delivered provision in a nursery, based within the main school building. The set up and delivery of provision was led by a Head Teacher, Assistant Head Teacher or Director of Early Years within the school.
- Schools C and D, both academy schools, provided for two-year-olds through a nursery set up as a subsidiary company of the main school. School D established a new nursery for two- to five-year-olds as a subsidiary company of the main academy school. The Head Teacher of the school worked closely with the Nursery Manager during the set up of provision. Once set up, the provision was largely managed by the Nursery Manager in conjunction with the Director of Early Years. In School C, the set up and delivery of provision was primarily led by the Nursery Manager.
- Schools A and F delivered provision in partnership with another setting on the school site. School A, a maintained nursery school, worked with an onsite nought-to-three year-old PVI provider. Two-year-olds attended the PVI setting and began to transition to the nursery school in the term before their third birthday. The nursery school Head Teacher and the Manager of the PVI took the opportunity of the demonstration project to work more collaboratively and shared the re-design, set up and delivery of provision. In School F, a primary school, provision was designed, delivered and led by the Manager of the school's onsite Children's Centre. Provision was delivered within the nursery attached to the infant school, though both children and parents attended the Children's Centre for one day a week during their first term.

### 3.1.3 Local area context

As discussed later in Section 3.3, interviewees reported that schools' local area context was an important influencing factor when designing their provision for two-year-olds, including the number of places offered, what type (funded or fee-paying), and when they were offered.

Seven schools (Schools A, B, C, E, F, G and H) were located in an urban area. Interviewees leading the provision in five schools reported providing in areas of deprivation with a high number of disadvantaged families, while two schools (B and C) reported providing in areas with a varied amount of need and number of disadvantaged families.

School D was based in a rural village. Interviewees described the area as affluent with a high number of working parents.

### 3.1.4 What were school's main reasons for providing for two-year-olds?

The case study schools identified three main reasons for developing and delivering provision for two-year-olds.

#### **Supporting early learning and development**

Those who led the provision in schools shared the overarching aim to support the learning and development of two-year-olds in advance of receiving their entitlement to free early education at age three. Schools commonly understood this to include supporting children to develop age-appropriate language and communication skills, and physical, social and emotional development. For a number of schools, this was linked to a wider aim to raise attainment throughout the school, as illustrated by one Head Teacher:

*“Well, it’s raising attainment, and we need to raise attainment across the whole school, from foundation stage all the way up to year six...”*

(Head Teacher, School C)

#### **Reaching disadvantaged two-year-olds**

Supporting young children’s early learning and development was considered especially important by those who led the provision in areas with a high number of disadvantaged families. Schools observed that some disadvantaged children were less likely to have spent time outside of their home socialising with children of the same age, which made the transition to nursery difficult at three years-old. One Head Teacher reported observing a positive impact on disadvantaged two-year-olds who had attended early education before attending the nursery aged three and cited this as the main reason why the school developed provision for two-year-olds:

*“We know that children who have come through the Children’s Centre and our under threes do better when they leave than the children who have just come from the outside aged three...We’re going to make a difference from the age of three but think of the enormous difference we can make if we get them in at two. It’s a no brainer.”*

(Head Teacher, School B)

This was a commonly held view across schools which expected provision for two-year-olds to have a particularly positive impact on disadvantaged children. Central to this was the opportunity to work with families at an earlier stage.

#### **Addressing a lack of places locally**

A number of schools had developed provision for two-year-olds in response to a perceived lack of places in their local area. The Head Teacher in School D reported a lack of places to accommodate working parents and decided to provide full day provision throughout the year. While interviewees in Schools E and H reported that a 'gap' in provision had been created due to the closure of local children's centres.

In School F, the Children's Centre Manager, who led the provision, was aware that many two-year-olds in the area were eligible to receive a funded place but was concerned that local providers would not be able to provide enough places or were not sufficiently committed to improving the quality of their provision. One of the interviewees from this school noted:

*"...we knew that there wasn't enough [funded places] and there wasn't enough good quality provision."*

(Children's Centre Manager, School F)

Interviews with local authority representatives supported this concern for quality. One local authority representative was working with a school because of this, and commented:

*"We know there are a number of providers in the area that can offer the provision, but we felt this was one where the quality was the key thing, I think."*

(Local authority representative, School A)

Schools considered themselves well placed to address these perceived gaps through their experience of working with families, as well as their knowledge and commitment to providing high quality provision.

## **3.2 Set up of provision**

This section discusses the steps schools followed to set up and begin delivering provision for two-year-olds. It includes a discussion of challenges and enabling factors as well as some of the learning points schools felt it would be useful to share with others.

### **3.2.1 Achieving buy-in and support from school governors and the local authority**

The majority of schools reported that they had successfully secured the support and buy-in of school governors, senior members of the school leadership team and local authorities with ease when setting up provision. Those who led the provision suggested

this was due to an understanding of the local area needs and the design of provision which fitted strategically with the wider aims of the school. One Head Teacher highlighted that the support of school governors was key to driving plans forward:

*“I’m lucky because governors recognise the vulnerability of the families and the need for it...”*  
(Head Teacher, School H)

Similarly, a Governor in School D highlighted how the provision fitted well with the needs of local working parents:

*“We were always aware, from the existing cohort of parents, that there were a lot of working parents and people who need childcare and the plan just sat in nicely...I think it fitted in nicely with the school.”*  
(Governor, School D)

Some interviewees, however, noted that achieving buy-in and support was more difficult with their local authority and would have welcomed more support in the area of financial planning (particularly around the grants and capital funding that were available), an issue we discuss further in Section 3.7.2.

### 3.2.2 The design and planning of provision

When designing their provision, schools drew on a wide range of resources, including the advice and support of the early years team within the school, a network of local schools, external training providers and the local authority. A number of common factors emerged which included:

- **The strategic aims of the wider school:** For example, the Head Teacher and PVI Nursery Manager in School A worked in partnership to plan provision in line with the nursery school’s school improvement plan. They reported it was important to ensure the provision for two-year-olds was seen as an integral aspect of the whole school and did not stand alone.
- **External training and support from other settings/schools:** For example, the design and planning of provision in School E was heavily influenced by the support and training received from a local setting rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. Those who led the provision in School F attended training on working with

disadvantaged families, which influenced their plan to include a significant element of working with parents in the design of provision.

- **Information and support from the local authority:** The advice and support of a local authority early years consultant (including information on local birth rates and numbers eligible to receive a funded place) was considered by many to be extremely helpful, as illustrated by the Early Years Lead in School B, who commented:

*“I feel that if someone comes and gives you ideas and tips it’s something you can go forward, it makes you, helps you to reflect.”*

(Early Years Lead, School B)

Four schools (Schools A, D, E and F) reported that the design, planning and set up of provision took longer than initially anticipated, which included developing job specifications to recruit new staff and gathering information from the local authority to inform financial planning. Interviewees in School A, a maintained nursery school that delivered in partnership with an onsite PVI provider, reflected that relationship building and agreeing shared goals between those who led the provision was a key phase in the design and planning of provision that took longer than either had first thought. Once in place, however, the development of provision progressed quickly.

### 3.2.4 Ofsted registration

Schools varied in their experiences of registering with Ofsted as an early years provider. Some schools considered it a useful opportunity to ensure plans for provision were in place, as illustrated by the Director of Early Years in School H, who commented:

*“...it actually makes you go through all the stages to make, all the phases to make sure you’ve got your room set up properly, all the criteria, so I saw it as a positive.”*

(Director of Early Years, School H)

Other schools reported it was a time consuming process, which in some cases caused delay to the set-up of provision. The Children’s Centre Manager who led the provision in School F discussed how the strong support of the Head Teacher enabled the registration process to move forward, commenting:

*“...fortunately we do have her [Head Teacher] backing on that because...she sees the school as the community hub, she was prepared to push through and do that really. So that [Ofsted registration] was our main stumbling block and that took time.”*

(Children’s Centre Manager, School F)

### **3.2.5 Changes to the building/facilities**

The four schools that set up provision for the first time in 2013/14 academic year made minor changes to the building and facilities in order to begin delivering provision. Interviewees reported their ability to begin offering places was enabled by having an appropriate space available, which allowed them to begin delivering on a small scale and build up to expanding provision if space and funding was available.

Those who led provision in School E reported they were ‘lucky’ that a room was available within the school, that already had appropriate facilities and resources for two-year-olds, as the Children’s Centre that had previously rented the space had recently closed. Similarly, School F converted existing space within the nursery school into a ‘hub’ for two-year-olds and furnished it in a ‘homely’ manner with sofas, curtains, and soft rugs. Extra windows, carpets and blinds were installed and the walls were repainted.

Developing appropriate and nurturing indoor and outdoor environments is discussed further in Section 3.3.7.

### 3.2.6 What did schools find helpful when setting up their provision?

Schools were keen to share their experience with others, including advice they would give for those setting up provision. This included:

- **Allow adequate time for planning and set up:** A number of schools reported that the planning and set up of provision had taken longer than initially anticipated. School D reported it was *“important that you can dedicate some proper time”* to planning all aspects of delivery to ensure the right staff could be recruited and the provision advertised with parents.
- **Create links with the local authority and wider service providers:** School B reported working with health visitors early on when planning provision had been *“invaluable”*, as *“they have got that expertise and it helps us to work holistically.”* The advice and support of local authority early years consultants was considered extremely useful by a number of schools.
- **Work with other local providers:** Schools that made links with other schools and settings providing for two-year-olds found it helpful to exchange ideas and share information during the set up phase. School G found it helpful to have another Head Teacher to speak to during the set up phase and advised setting up regular meetings to *“keep the momentum up”*, commenting:

*“If you can find other schools that are at the same sort of stage that you are, that is, it was, it’s just been brilliant, and so supportive at the different levels. It’s been great for me as a Head at the level I’m working at. It’s been great for [the early years practitioners] at their level, and it’s been good for them to look at the different kinds of delivery models that they can pick up from a delivery point of view....I would have hated to do it in isolation, I have to say.”* (Head Teacher, School G)

- **Visit a wide range of providers and consider local area needs:** A number of schools reported that visiting a wide range of settings helped develop their provision through exploring building and facilities’ options as well as business models, as advised by the Nursery Manager of School D:

*“Go and explore children’s centres, go and explore private ones, ones that are based within schools, all the different ones and see what they offer and then look at your catchment. Who are you appealing to? So do you need to offer flexible sessions? What do your parents need? Have you got lots of siblings? Is there local childminders? Could you set up a network so that you haven’t got any places on a Thursday, Friday but there’s a childminder ten minutes down the road that has got availability.”* (Nursery Manager, School D)

### 3.3 Models of delivery

This section summarises schools' models of delivery, including the number of places offered, the environment in which provision was delivered, approaches towards early education and care, as well as the factors which have influenced these models. It also includes a discussion of what schools have found to be helpful and learning points they would share with other schools.

#### 3.3.1 How many places did schools offer and were there plans to increase the number of places?

Schools varied in the number of places offered for two-year-olds from September 2013, ranging between eight and 34 places. A breakdown of places offered can be found in **Table 1, Section 3.1.**

- **Four schools that began delivering provision from September 2013 offered between eight and sixteen places.** Those that led the provision in School F had the opportunity to begin offering 16 places, enabled by a shortfall in the take up of three year-olds places, but chose to offer eight in order to leave room for children to progress to the three year-old provision with ease. School D provided eight places initially but increased to 16 places once an additional classroom has been built. Schools E and G provided 16 places, which was considered by those who led the provision the minimum number to test a viable business model.
- **Two schools (Schools A and B), that had experience of delivering provision for two-year-olds, continued to provide a similar number of places from September 2013 but increased the proportion of those offered as funded or fee-paying.** Schools A offered 24 places while School B offered 34 places. A full discussion of the increase in proportion of funded places can be found in Section 3.3.2.
- **Schools C and G offered the maximum places allowed by the space available,** eight and 32 places respectively.

All schools described their provision as 'oversubscribed' and were working from a waiting list.

#### Expanding the numbers of places offered

**A key finding from the case study visits was that the availability of space was the most important consideration for schools when deciding whether to expand the number of places offered.** The Head Teacher of School D reported this proved to be a barrier to expanding the initial numbers of places for two-year-olds, and commented:

*"...our problem at that point wasn't the ratios, wasn't the quality of staff, it was the space. We just didn't have space to take the children."*

(Head Teacher, School D)

**Six case study schools had or planned to increase the number of places offered since September 2013, through securing funding for a new building or classroom** (Schools A, C, D, F, G and H). For two schools this enabled them to plan for a slow expansion of places. School G had plans to increase from 16 to 60. School F was also planning to increase from eight to 16 places initially, rising to 20 and eventually 40 places.

The length of time to expand the number of places offered ranged between two months and two years (expected at the time of fieldwork). This depended on the time it took to apply for and agree funding as well as the extent of the building work planned. For example:

- Shortly after beginning to deliver provision in September 2013, Governors in School D noted the high level of demand locally and agreed to fund the building of a new classroom to increase the number of places offered. The new classroom was completed in November 2013. The quick turnaround was facilitated by the availability of space surrounding the nursery to build on.
- At the time of fieldwork, School G was in the process of confirming funding from the local authority for a new building. If agreed, the building would be in place September 2015. In the meantime, those who led the provision planned to expand places in September 2014 by converting a staffroom into an additional classroom.
- Schools A and H secured funding from the local authority for a new purpose built building. Building work was due to be completed in September 2014 and spring 2015 respectively.

Those who led the provision reported it was important to expand in this systematic fashion to ensure that the quality of staff and environment remained high while the number of places increased:

*“Because our main priority is their wellbeing, so we’re just going to take 16 to start with, just rather than go in at the deep end.”*

(Children’s Centre Manager, School F)

This was mirrored in interviews with local authority representatives, as one commented:

*“...we’re keen to promote the places as long as there is a commitment to improve the quality.”*

(Local Authority Representative, School A)

### **3.3.2 What was the make-up of places?**

The make-up of places varied across schools to include:

- **All places as funded places:** In four schools, all places were funded (Schools E, F, G and H).
- **A mixture of fee-paying and funded places:** School C provided 15 places, eight of which were funded. While the vast majority of places in Schools A and B were funded, a small number were fee-paying. As mentioned in Section 3.3.1, School A and B retained a similar number of places as prior to September 2013 but increased the proportion of funded places. School A increased from seven to 22 funded places, while at the time of fieldwork, School B was in the process of arranging that all places were to be funded. Those who led the provision in both schools discussed how the high demand locally for funded places influenced this decision.
- **All places as fee-paying places:** All places provided in School D were fee-paying. Those who led the provision reported that most families in the local area were not eligible for a funded place, however, they were beginning to receive an increase in enquiries regarding funded places, and a small number of children were due to begin in funded places in September 2014.

Schools that provided for funded two-year-olds reported that many needed extra support, whether with socialising, speech and language development, or referrals to specialist services. The Nursery Manager in School C reflected this had been a key consideration of the school when deciding upon the make-up of places offered. Although the school wanted to provide for more funded children, they had to consider the implications of doing so for staff costs and resources. The Nursery Manager commented:

*“If you took 16 funded two-year-olds you could have a lot of problems there, a lot of issues... you couldn’t do it quite as easily with the same amount of staff.”*

(Nursery Manager, School C)

### 3.3.3 Informing families of places available

Processes for informing parents of the provision and places available varied across schools. In a number of areas, the local authority contacted families directly to inform them of their eligibility for a funded place and advised them of local schools and settings with places available. Parents then contacted the schools directly to enquire about a place and applied to the local authority for a funded place within that school. In other areas, schools sent out letters to parents of children already attending the school or a stay and play session at an onsite children’s centre. Only two schools, School D and E, communicated places to the wider community through the use of leaflets. However, schools reported word of mouth regarding the quality of the resources available to be the most important way of filling places. For example, going forward, those who led the provision in School A discussed the importance of word of mouth but also planned to design a banner for outside the school:

*“...it’s parents’ choice because they get a list of providers. But we often find that if we get one parent from a certain area then we’ll get others. Also, because this nursery school’s been here for over 30 years we’re getting children of parents who used to attend. So it’s word of mouth, it’s reputation, it’s our resources... They’re already coming in anyway and I think that word of mouth is crucial but [the banner] will just be the icing on the cake type of thing.”*

(Nursery School Head teacher, School A)

### **3.3.4 When were places offered?**

The schools that offered all or mostly funded places did so for three hours a day, five days a week, either in morning or afternoon sessions. While parents chose whether children attended a morning or afternoon session, there was little flexibility within this offer. Some schools reported that this was in order to offer places to a greater number of two-year-olds, considered especially important for those in disadvantaged areas where demand was greatest. Additionally, a number of schools provided morning or afternoon sessions but not whole-day provision as they were unable to provide a lunch time meal.

Schools A and D offered families a great deal of flexibility. Within School A, families of funded children were offered the choice of attending a full day two or three times a week. Those who led the provision reported they were able to do so by working in partnership, sharing resources, staff and space. Those who led the provision in School D discussed how providing flexibility was central to their delivery model. If available, parents could choose any hours that worked best for them. This was facilitated by an ‘overwhelming’ demand for places locally and changes made to the school building to create extra space.

### **3.3.5 Did schools offer enhancements to their provision?**

Four schools (Schools A, B, C and D, all delivering a mixture of fee-paying and funded places) offered a number of enhancements to their provision, including additional care around sessions (before and after), places during the school holidays, and the opportunity for parents to pay for additional hours to funded places.

Schools that offered additional care around sessions reported they had carefully considered the appropriateness of these hours for two-year-olds and ensured their environment and activities reflected the needs of young children, as illustrated by the PVI Manager in School A:

*"That is a bit of a concern that you have think through carefully because things like naps in the afternoon, they are a really important part of children’s life at that age. I’ve got one little one now at the moment who, you can see him nodding off in the afternoon, and so you know that you have to adapt that. If they’ve been here in, a full day in the morning we tend to do more enrichment activities in the afternoon, like they would do at home. So baking, gardening, that kind of thing, and more*

*chilled time because they've had a busy morning."*

(PVI Manager, School A)

School A also offered places throughout the year, including during school holidays. Those who led the provision considered the needs of each individual child and offered parents of funded children the option to stretch their offer to cover the whole year if they felt it would benefit the child. For example, if practitioners considered a half term holiday would disrupt a child settling into provision in their first term.

### **3.3.6 What was the environment like?**

**A key finding from the case study visits was that schools considered the environment to be one of the two most important aspects of providing high quality provision for two-year-olds** (the other being staff). As such, schools spent a good deal of time planning the environment and drew on external training, consultations with local authority early years consultants, research, and experience to deliver a comfortable, safe and stimulating environment for two-year-olds.

Those who led the provision reflected that it was important to think through the needs of two-year-olds and how they differed from children at other ages. All reported it was important to create a 'home away from home' for two-year-olds. This was especially true for some disadvantaged children who sometimes found it difficult to transition from their home to the setting. When describing the environment for two-year-olds, the Early Years Lead in School B reflected:

*"...the home corner is the most invaluable area and I do recall when we first started, when they first were coming in, the home corner was the hub, all the children came down into this area and played into this area, it was much more comfortable... You have a little sofa, you have the dolls, you have the cooking equipment, the fridges and things like that, so those things are replicated at home, so these children have never been to the provision before, so we find that this is the most secure area."*

(Early Years Lead, School B)

Schools also reported it was important to consider the 'whole child' when planning their environment. In School A, a local authority Early Years Consultant worked with the Head Teacher and PVI Manager to plan how best to support two-year-olds in the environment, and asked the following questions about their environment:

*"It's a holistic approach to a child...about how children, young children learn... What are the characteristics of effective learning for all ages but on those in particular? What is the effect of environment on a child's brain development? That kind of thing... And then that's leading to the choices that you make around the decoration of the room, everything, obviously having calming colours and good*

*quality resources and something that they don't have at home."*

(Nursery Manager, School A)

### **3.3.7 What was a typical day like for a two-year-old?**

Children attended sessions which included a mix of structured activities, such as sitting in small groups, face painting and singing songs, as well as sessions where children explored the outdoor environment and played with others. A mixture of age appropriate structured and free flow activities was considered important by those who led the provision in many schools, who were keen to stress that provision should not be highly structured or 'school like'. The PVI Manager in School A reflected:

*"...there's no point in putting them in a watered-down structure of school, it actually concerns us in some ways that it can have an adverse effect."*

(PVI Manager, School A)

Similarly, the Nursery Manager in School F stressed the importance of having a clear expectation of what were the aims of the provision:

*"I want the two-year-olds to remain two-year-olds. We're preparing them for nursery, while we're preparing the three year-olds for school. We'll have to be careful of that, because they're only two. The expectations have to remain clear."*

(Nursery manager, School F)

Other schools highlighted how the environment and activities aimed to ensure two-year-olds felt secure, in a first step in preparing children for nursery, as illustrated by the Nursery Manager of School C:

*"There's so many more things a two-year-old needs just to make them feel secure. And once they're secure and they feel safe then they can, their learning begins but it's quite a build up to that."*

(Nursery Manager, School C)

### 3.3.8 What did schools find helpful when designing the environment and activities for two-year-olds?

Schools were keen to share their experience with others, including advice they would give for those designing the environment and activities for two-year-olds. This included:

- **Draw on the experience of other settings also providing for two-year-olds:** As mentioned previously, schools found it helpful to visit a wide range of settings and work with other schools when designing their provision. For example, School G developed strong links with other schools in the local area, and reported to gain many useful ideas for recruitment and ways to feed back about a child's progress to their parents.
- **Consider the child as a whole and how the setting can closely mirror a home like environment:** Schools highlighted the importance of providing a home like environment for two-year-olds to feel safe, secure and confident in the setting. Many schools found the use of neutral colours and home like furnishing to be useful. School C also recommended toys and resources to be placed at eye level for ease of access, and to incorporate 'small cosy areas' as they learned two-year-olds needed more individual or alone time than three year-olds.
- **Some children, especially those that are disadvantaged, may need more support when transitioning from home to the school setting:** School B developed 'attachment boxes' with parents, which included familiar objects from home in order to help the child feel calm and more secure if they got upset for any reason. The use of the attachment boxes was also deemed to be a useful parental engagement strategy
- **Consider the needs of two-year-olds attending for a full day when planning activities:** Schools A and D highlighted the importance of scheduling more physical or structured activities in the morning and allowing for quiet time, naps, stories and independent play during the afternoon for children who attended for a long day.

## 3.4 Staffing the provision

This section describes the different staffing arrangements the schools had established within their provision for two-year-olds. It reports on the ratio of staff members to children, levels of experience and qualifications, staff skills and knowledge that schools identified as important when working with two-year-olds, and details of training. It includes a discussion of challenges and enabling factors as well as learning points schools felt were useful to share with others.

### 3.4.1 How was provision staffed?

All schools staffed provision through a ratio of one staff member to four two-year-olds, as required by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework<sup>11</sup>. Most schools reported this ‘worked well’ in practice to ensure children were happy, stimulated and formed a secure attachment with staff members. However, some interviewees highlighted a need for flexibility and additional support when providing for funded two-year-olds.

The level of experience and qualification of staff working within the provision varied across schools to include a mixture of teachers, early years professionals, Level 6 managers and teaching assistants with an NVQ of Level 1, 2 or 3.

- In six schools (Schools A, B, C, D, F and G), provision was staffed through a combination of teacher and/or early years professionals alongside teaching assistants.
- Schools E and H staffed provision through a Level 6 manager and teaching assistants.

### 3.4.2 Recruitment of staff

**A key finding from the case study visits was that schools considered staffing to be one of the two most important aspects of providing a high quality provision for two-year-olds** (the other being the environment). Interviewees in all schools were keen to stress the importance of high quality staff when providing for two-year-olds and most were confident their provision was staffed to the highest quality their budget allowed for, achieved through recruiting new staff, up-skilling existing staff, identifying training needs, providing external and in-house training as well as having the support of senior staff members.

Five schools recruited new staff. Three began delivering provision from September 2013 (School D, E and G) and two had experience of delivering provision prior to this (Schools A and H). Those that had not provided for two-year-olds before reported developing new job descriptions to be a time consuming and challenging process initially and they noted that they had found it helpful to draw upon the advice and support of other schools/settings. Going forward, those who led the provision in School D and E reported making contact and working with Further Education Colleges to identify newly qualified staff earlier. The head teacher in School D noted an aim to, *“build up this pool of people who we can tap into it in the future”* when recruiting new staff members.

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<sup>11</sup>Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/271631/eyfs\\_statutory\\_framework\\_march\\_2012.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271631/eyfs_statutory_framework_march_2012.pdf)

**Ensuring that the staffing of the provision was of a high quality was considered a key challenge in three schools** (Schools B, G and H). One such school, School G, staffed their provision through a mixture of permanent staff members and agency staff during the first year of delivery, cautious of maintaining effective and sustainable staffing levels. The Head Teacher leading the provision described initial difficulties in securing high quality agency staff. This had been resolved by taking a more assertive stance with the organisation supplying agency staff.

Those who led the provision in School B reported that although they wanted to employ a teaching assistant with an NVQ Level 3 they were only able to afford to recruit a member of staff at Level 2. The Head Teacher reflected this was disappointing and reported an on-going tension between providing a high quality provision and being restrained by financial considerations, commenting:

*“...if we are a high quality centre then we need to put our money where our mouth is and say, we’re high quality, we only ever employ a Level 3 staff.”*

(Head Teacher, School B)

Similarly, the Director of Early Years in School H wanted to recruit an Early Years Teacher to lead on linking the two-year-old provision to the Foundation Stage within the school but was unable to fund this. The Director of Early Years reflected:

*“There needs to be an EY Teacher in the room with the two-year-olds and there is not one currently. Twos team have the same agenda, expectations, ways of working, meetings and planning sessions of the nursery and reception...However, when you give it to your nursery and reception team to do it’ll be done a lot quicker and to a different standard, because they’re outstanding teachers. With the twos team, they’re all outstanding practitioners and they’re the best staff you can get, a manager, Level 3, Level 2 and Level 1, but at the end of the day your manager and level 3 are not teachers.”*

(Director of Early Years, School H)

Without an early years teacher, the Director of Early Years assumed much of the responsibility, including leading on the tracking and monitoring of children’s progress. This was not considered a sustainable approach and would require additional funding from the local authority or support from School Governors to hire an early years teacher.

### **3.4.3 What knowledge and skills was it important for staff to have?**

When asked to consider what knowledge and skills staff working with two-year-olds should have, schools identified the following:

- **Knowledge of two-year-olds and an understanding of their needs:** Schools highlighted the importance for staff to have an understanding of two-year-olds and how their needs differed from three year-olds specifically.

- **Knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage:** An understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage profile was considered key as well as the Early Years Progress Check at age two.
- **Knowledge of child development:** There was consensus amongst schools that provided for funded two-year-olds that it was important for staff to have knowledge of child development to best support disadvantaged children.
- **An understanding of wider support services available:** Schools providing for funded children discussed a need for staff to have knowledge of support services, such as children's centres and health visitors, to signpost families to if needed.
- **Ability to work with parents effectively:** The ability to communicate effectively and consistently with parents was considered important by all schools.

#### 3.4.4 What training did staff receive?

As discussed previously in 3.4.3, schools highlighted the importance for staff to have an understanding of two-year-olds and how their needs specifically differed from three year-olds. All schools reported a strong commitment to training staff to support this understanding, whether through drawing upon the advice and training from a local authority early years consultant, work shadowing at an Early Years Centre of Excellence or through attending external training on a specific area of development, such as attachment theory or speech and language development. Those that provided for a high number of disadvantaged families reported it was beneficial for staff to attend additional training in child development and working with the parents of disadvantaged children.

Four schools established regular internal training sessions, in addition to external training, to aid the up-skilling and development of staff. For example:

- School D reported up-skilling staff was a challenge when they first began delivering provision, and as such, the Nursery Manager scheduled **regular observations of staff** and held one-to-one support sessions, which was found to be beneficial.
- The up-skilling of staff was enabled in School B by **regular training** delivered by a community school governor who worked from the setting half a day each week.
- In School A, where provision was delivered in partnership, staff from the PVI provider and nursery school attended **joint training, and shared knowledge** and experience with one another at regular points.

- In School H, those working with two-year-olds attended weekly training led by the Director of Early Years, which focused on **tracking and monitoring children's progress**. Finding the time for staff to attend proved a challenge as funding covered teaching time but not the additional time for training (discussed further in Section 3.7.4). To remedy this, the Director of Early Years applied to the local authority for extra funding which was granted.

### 3.4.5 Staffing in key person groups

Four of the eight case study schools staffed their provision in key person groups (Schools A, C, D and H). Individual children were paired with a member of staff who, each time the child attended the setting, was consistently tasked to work with them. To do so, these four schools made a change to staff's existing working arrangements. Those who led the provision felt it would benefit children to build a relationship with the same member of staff. The consistency of staff was considered to most benefit disadvantaged children by those who led the provision in School A, where two members of staff were assigned to work as key workers with the funded two-year-olds. Their working arrangements were changed from shift work between 8am and 6pm to consistently working 9am-4pm.

*"And that is so important at this age, it's important at the three and four year-old but I think it really for those...they build up that bond with a key person and then they build up the bond with the children of the other key people in the room but initially they have to feel secure with that key person."*

(PVI Manager, School A)

Similarly, the Head Teacher in School D reported it was important that two-year-olds attending for a full day to consistently work with the same member of staff, and commented:

*"...that will be consistent staff because I think that's important and particularly around the two-year-olds that the person they see when they come in the morning will be the person who sees them through all day and will see them through the whole week."*

(Head Teacher, School D)

School C took a more flexible approach where each child was paired with a key person as well as a 'buddy' key person who was kept abreast of any updates regarding the child, allowing for contingency support in case the key worker was unable to attend provision due to sickness or annual leave, without causing any changes to the overall working pattern.

### 3.4.6 What did schools find useful when staffing their provision?

- **When recruiting staff for provision for two-year-olds, ensuring staff feel part of the wider school:** Schools highlighted the importance of the provision fitting seamlessly into the wider school, a central aspect of which was ensuring staff felt part of the 'bigger picture'. In School H, staff received the same training as the rest of the Foundation Stage. *"Twos in a school is completely different to dealing with twos anywhere else....so the bigger picture of where we need to get the children to, the early years outcomes, the framework, the assessment side of things, so they have all that training off me every week."* (Director of Early Years, School H)
- **Schedule regular training to support and up-skill existing staff members:** The Nursery Manager in School D found it useful to schedule regular observations with staff and carry out one-to-one support and training sessions.
- **If working with disadvantaged children, attend training on working with disadvantaged families:** School A highlighted the value of attending training on working with disadvantaged families and identified the opportunity through the support and advice of the local authority. Other schools identified high quality training through working with other providers.
- **If working in partnership with another setting, exchange previous training and knowledge and attend external training jointly:** Staff in School A, a partnership with an onsite PVI provider, attended external training sessions together in order to increase partnership working. Those who led the provision also organised regular internal training sessions where early years teachers from the nursery school shared training and knowledge with the staff in the PVI setting, while PVI staff shared their knowledge and experience of working with young children. Staff reported benefiting from considering how best to support children across both settings. *"...we looked at what a child needs in a whole setting."* (Early Years Practitioner, School A)
- **Arrange staff in key worker groups, especially if working with disadvantaged two-year-olds:** Schools which arranged staff in key worker groups reported that the increased consistency in staffing benefitted children and parents by building up a relationship of trust and increasing children's confidence.

## 3.5 Working with parents

This section summarises the processes and activities schools developed to work with parents of two-year-olds. All schools demonstrated a strong commitment to working with parents and were keen to share their practice. As such, this section also includes detailed examples of what schools found to be helpful when engaging and working with parents.

### 3.5.1 How did schools work with parents?

Working with families was considered 'vital' to delivering a high quality provision for funded two-year-olds. School H carried out a good deal of work to do so and highlighted parental engagement as the school's "*biggest learning curve*", while those who led the provision in School A made considerable changes to existing parental engagement strategies since providing for more funded two-year-olds.

The Assistant Head Teacher in School E reported the provision aimed to "*raise parents' expectations of what school is*", while others reported their provision could 'only do so much' to support children to develop age-appropriate skills within the setting and it was important to work with parents to help support their child's development at home, a view also shared in interviews with local authority representatives. One local authority representative commented:

*"...you cannot separate [working with] the children from their families. I think that's one of the very crucial things. You can't not want to work very closely with families and help to support the families to support themselves."*

(Local Authority Representative, School A)

The majority of schools that worked with funded two-year-olds carried out home visits with families in advance of children attending the provision. Those who led the provision reported these visits helped build a relationship of trust between staff and parents and allowed children to become familiar with staff members, which aided their transition from home to the setting. Schools continued to build these relationships through organising events within the setting for parents to attend with their children, allowing time for informal discussions with practitioners. To ensure a high turnout, those who led the provision in School A reflected it was important to consider parents' interests when planning these sessions.

Schools drew upon existing links, and created new links with children's centres to signpost parents for additional learning and support. Schools B, E and F, with an onsite children's centre, encouraged parents to stay during their child's session so that they could make use of additional services, such as Citizen's Advice services.

School F embedded parental engagement into their provision and made attendance at a session at the children's centre once a week a condition of their child's placement. So, within the first term, children attended the nursery four afternoons a week and attended the children's centre with their parents one afternoon a week for nine weeks. During these sessions, staff shared their knowledge of child development, how it could be supported at home, and used pictures and video footage of their children playing to show parents the progress their children had made.

### 3.5.2 What did schools find useful when working with parents?

Schools carried out a range of activities to engage and work with parents, and reported the following to be helpful when doing so:

- **Assess and monitor your strategies for working with parents:** When planning for the delivery of provision, School H found it helpful to carry out an audit of all processes across their early years provision, supported by advice from the local authority, and identified areas where they could improve. *"...make sure you've got your optimum parental engagement, you do your parental engagement audit, find out where your weaknesses are, because you won't know what your weaknesses are if you don't know what you can provide."* (Director of Early Years, School H). School H also stressed the importance of frequently monitoring and evaluating whether strategies to engage parents were effective. Each term, staff working with two-year-olds and the Director of Early Years met to reflect on whether they had successfully engaged parents and devised a plan to build upon this in the next term.
- **Carry out home visits in advance of delivering provision:** All schools that carried out home visits in advance of providing for two-year-olds reported they were a useful opportunity to get to know the whole family, ask parents what type of activities their child enjoyed, and begin to build a trusting relationship between the school and family.
- **Include parents in their child's transition from home to setting:** As discussed previously in Section 3.3.8, in School B, parents included items for their child's 'attachment box' such as a scarf that smells of home. School H developed 'learning together books' where parents included photographs of their family for practitioners to show children if they became upset.
- **Create links to wider services, such as children's centres, in order to signpost parents towards further support if needed:** This included a range of activities, including ESOL classes.
- **Consult with parents when planning activities:** Every half term, School H organised a parent planning meeting where parents and key workers met to plan activities for the next term. They found it useful to ask parents what they felt their

child would enjoy and plan the activity together. The Director of Early Years commented: *“It’s got to be consistent, but it’s also got to be meaningful to them, so they can see that they’ve come in, they’ve suggested this song for [their child] to dance to and she’s going home and saying it’s happening.”*

- **Include parents in activities:** School A planned a number of activities for parents and children to attend together, such as an Easter egg painting morning, with parents, as well as children’s, interests in mind. Those who led the provision reported that parents were more engaged as a result and, through the opportunity to speak in an informal environment, a relationship of trust was built up with key workers.
- **Help parents support their child’s development at home:** In School H, this included giving recipes and ideas for activities to do at home, such as making play dough. School F asked parents to complete a self assessment form at the beginning of their first term to consider what they already do at home with their child, provided new ideas on how to build upon this and asked parents to complete another self assessment form at the end of the term to help parents track their journey.
- **Ask parents to complete observations of their child’s progress:** Each week, School H asked parents to complete an observation sheet at home of their child’s progress and submit it to the school. Those who led the provision reported parents felt more engaged in their child’s progress as a result. To make this interesting and enjoyable for parents, those who led the provision created a light-hearted competition between groups of parents to see who could successfully complete the most observation forms.
- **Use visual methods to communicate with English as an Additional Language (EAL) parents:** School F highlighted the benefits of using photographs, video footage and graphs to communicate a child’s progress when working with EAL parents.

## 3.6 Parents' and children's experiences

Within this section, the views and experiences of parents and children who attended provision in the eight case study schools are presented. Discussion groups and interviews were carried out with 34 parents in total and ranged between one and eight parents in each school. Parents were asked to consider their reasons for taking up a place within the school, their overall experience and whether they perceived any benefits to their child attending.

### 3.6.1 Why did parents take up a place for their child?

Parents interviewed highlighted a range of reasons why they took up a place for their child. Most commonly, parents discussed thinking their child would enjoy and benefit from attending an early years setting. For many, the availability of a funded place, the location of the school and positive word of mouth information about the quality of the school was also important.

One parent in School F discussed applying for a place at the school as a result of attending regular 'stay and play' sessions at the onsite children's centre, when she noticed her son was enjoying himself:

*"I recognised that he wanted more. Because when it was time to go home he didn't want to and I thought he wanted more. So obviously when you see your child getting involved you don't want to hold him back. So as soon as I heard about the two year funding, that was about it, I went to see if I was entitled."*

(Parent, School F)

Similarly, another parent, whose child had ADHD, wanted to keep her son active and prepare him for nursery by socialising with other children. She reflected on her reasons for doing so:

*"...it wasn't along the lines of me needing a break, it was he needed something to keep him busy. He's got ADHD and mild cerebral palsy as well. So he needed that thing to, being at home, there wasn't enough to keep him busy... mainly I wanted him in with a lot more kids anyway so that he could get used to being with a lot of kids anyway."*

(Parent, School A)

Many of the parents interviewed received a funded place for their child. A number of those interviewed recalled first becoming aware funding available by a letter from their local authority. Others, who had older children within the school, were informed by staff who helped them apply for a place. For these parents, the availability of the funded place was a key driver for their child attending the provision. One parent discussed wanting to send their daughter to an early years setting but was not able to afford it. When they became aware of the funding available they were quick to apply for a funded place in School C.

*“I did the paperwork and thought, ‘no, she’s not going to get it’, it’s one of those things that you hear about that’s too good to be true. But she did get it and she’s got a lot out of it so far. Her confidence has changed and she’s good with other people.”*

(Parent, School C)

Location of the school also proved to be an important factor. For one parent whose child attended provision at School D, an academy school in a rural hamlet, the location of the provision was key as her older child attended the school. The parent moved her son from a PVI, and reflected:

*“..the only reason I moved him, I was quite happy with the other nursery and the care, was purely because my daughter goes to the school. So for drop off, it means I can drop both my children and it means they can be in the same place, which is lovely.”*

(Parent, School D)

Word of mouth regarding the quality of the setting was a key reason why parents chose the school over other local settings with funded places available. One mother, with English as an Additional Language (EAL), was informed about the funding by her Health Visitor, who also suggested School A as ‘the best’ locally. The parent commented:

*“... if you don’t born here and you don’t know about the system, how children grow up...and it’s your first, you’re still learning, I don’t know what he needs, why I’m putting to school. So, she [Health Visitor], she say this one is the best serving this area and yeah, she apply here for us then. So I think it’s good.”*

(Parent, School A)

Parents in School B discussed visiting a number of settings locally before deciding on the school, weighing up the availability of outside space and quality of resources for their children to play with.

### 3.6.2 Parents' overall experience

A key finding of the case study visits was that parents were overwhelmingly positive about the provision their child attended and the availability of funded places.

- **Children were perceived by their parents to enjoy attending the provision.** When asked whether they were happy with the provision their child attended, all parents interviewed were keen to stress how enjoyable the provision was for their child. A number of parents recounted their child's enthusiasm for attending, including one parent whose child attended School F:

*"She loves it here, the first time she came into the room it was packed...she loves coming here, she loves playing here, you take her away she starts screaming!"*

(Parent, School F)

While another parent commented:

*"My daughter skips into class, skips, and then she's like this on the door, are you open yet? Are you open? And she runs in."*

(Parent, School G)

- **Parents across schools also discussed how attending the provision had benefited their children in different ways.** A number of parents reported that staff worked closely with them to develop their child's speech, both within the setting and at home. This was considered especially positive by EAL parents in Schools A and E. One parent reflected on the experience:

*"I noticed he's learning more things here than home...especially like talking and stuff, I don't have another adult at home who I talk to each other so he doesn't pick up anything. So when you are so busy and always are with two kids, it just make you forget everything, you just concentrate on they eat, they're clean...you don't think they need, yeah, that extra thing, talking to them or reading for them, this kind of stuff, I don't do everything. So he learn a lot of things here and he say to me sometimes, 'mum I know this is this now'. Yeah, he's actually correcting me."*

(Parent, School A)

For other parents, the activities and sessions within the provision far exceeded their initial expectations, and parents were positive that their children were being supported and prepared to begin learning, as illustrated by one parent whose child attended School B.

*“I wasn’t expecting this much and I just thought it was a play group and they come that’s it, but all this potty training, talking and listening, they are doing things that I was not expecting.”*

(Parent, School B)

- **Parents enjoyed working with staff at the school to support their child’s learning and development in the setting and at home.** Across schools, parents agreed that staff were helpful, easy to speak to and observed a ‘close bond’ between their children and staff members, especially in schools where the provision was staffed in key person groups. Parents attributed improvements in their child’s social skills and behaviour to this relationship. One parent commented:

*“They’re very loving. They come out of here very loving children. And kind...they learn to share. And if they aren’t sharing they’re shown how to share...they all get their own little key workers.”*

(Parent, School H)

While another parent reflected the change in her son’s behaviour since attending the provision:

*“[Son] was quite bad for hitting when he first started and it used to be where he wasn’t sure how to get his anger out, so he would just lash out. But after being here for so long it just completely changed... they did help him a lot in the little nursery, where it was showing them obviously there’s no kicking and no hitting and there’s another way of getting around things by just using words. And he’s always been a brilliant talker, he started talking quite early so he knew that he could do it but he just wasn’t sure how to do it.”*

(Parent, School A)

All schools that delivered a high number of funded places carried out home visits, which many parents found to be very helpful. One parent reflected:

*“I don’t think they could do any more, every problem that I have at home they are helping me deal with it.”*

(Parent, School H)

- **Two parents of children with higher needs described staff as ‘extremely helpful’** as they worked to ease their worries as well as gain access to specialist support services for their children. One parent recounted how the staff eased her anxiety:

*"Because she has special needs, I didn't ever think I would ever let her go until she's five to go to school...because she's got all these complications and I don't know who's going to look after her. That all goes through your mind, like, are they going to be good with her? But it's just like, she loves it. She loves everyone here. Everyone is so good with her."*

(Parent, School F)

### 3.6.3 Benefits to parents

Parents interviewed discussed how they had benefited from the provision also, including:

- **A number reported gaining a better understanding of their child’s development and how they could support this at home.** One parent in School H, where staff members worked with them each term to consider how best to support their child’s development, commented,

*"I wasn't aware of how capable they were of learning at that age...I didn't know that their little brains are capable of holding so much information."*

Another parent reported:

*"So it's really good, something I don't realise to have to teach him or do it because it's my first son and I've never done it before. So it's good, I am learning as well what I have to teach him."*

(Parent, School F)

- **The convenience of the location was commonly discussed by parents.** As mentioned previously, some parents had older children attending the school, which helped with the logistical problems of picking up and dropping off children at two separate locations.

*"The convenience is so helpful...I'm already here in the mornings."*

(Parent, School C)

- **The availability of funded places allowed for a small number of parents to gain employment and develop their English language skills.** Across schools, four parents discussed how their child attending the school had allowed them to gain employment. One parent, in School F, noted how a combination of the time available and support received by the onsite children’s centre had enabled her to return to work.

*"These things can help so you much, because some parents might not have no education, they might not know where to turn. It gives you a chance to get a part time job as well. I got offered a part time job yesterday."*

(Parent, School F)

Another parent, in School A, commented that the availability of a place five afternoons a week has allowed both her and her partner to return to work part-time:

*"...because [son] had the chance of coming here it meant for Mondays that I could go back to work and then, at the time, his dad wasn't working but then when he came here as well it meant his dad could go back to work as well, so it was easier for us both to work so, which did really help even though it was only afternoons."*

(Parent, School A)

This was also noted by a father in School C.

*"So, me and my partner could go back to working part-time."*

(Parent, School C)

In School E, where a high number of families had English as second language, two parents discussed how the availability of a funded place allowed them to attend English classes, and reflected they would not have been able to do so otherwise.

### **3.7 Finance and implications for financial sustainability**

This section outlines the main issues affecting the financial sustainability that emerged from the seven case interviews with finance officers undertaken during the case study

visits. It reports interviewees' views on economies of scale, availability of capital funding, the financial implications of approaches to flexibility of provision and staffing, managing risks to cash flow, and other issues.

### 3.7.1 Economies of scale and expectations for financial sustainability

Schools considered there to be economies of scale in providing nursery education, in that larger providers were felt to be more stable and sustainable than smaller providers. Extending provision to two-year-olds not only increases the immediate size of the nursery (Schools A and G), it potentially 'feeds' in to the nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds and, ultimately, to the school itself (Schools B and D), as illustrated by the following quotes:

*"I think obviously the bigger the nursery is the more sustainable it is and obviously opening up to two-year-olds is only good for us really from a sustainability point of view because you're accessing those children that you wouldn't necessarily access. Plus there's a natural flow, that maybe they would stay with you."*

(Finance Officer, School A)

The Business Manager at School G considered the viability of the two-year-old provision in the wider context for the school as a whole: *"Obviously we want nursery because if it's onsite it's feeding to our school, so you're looking for secure numbers going forward."*

*"I think the more children we get the better off we are because I think you'll get to a certain point where the overheads are covered and then anything over and above that worker's salary is profit."*

(Head Teacher, School B)

*"We made a decision that we would open from 7.45am until 6pm and we would open for 50 weeks a year. The knock on to that has been that we're able to now offer holiday care for the children throughout the school for 50 weeks a year because of economies of scale."*

(Head Teacher, School D)

A number of schools discussed the challenges of establishing a self-sustaining provision for two-year-olds. Schools B, E, and G covered shortfalls in their first year from overall school surpluses, but need to become sustainable within the next one or two years. The Head Teacher in School B reported the school was *"happy to take a loss now"* if it meant they could set up a high capacity offer and reach as many children as possible, while School E reported they will have to review after next year if it is feasible for them to continue.

As mentioned in Section 3.3.3, a number of schools had or were planning to expand their provision, such as School B, which planned to increase revenue by growing the number of places offered. For School E, those who led the provision reported they were unable to do so as they were already at capacity. However, they may start offering paid for enhancements to existing places, such as charging for longer opening hours and wraparound care.

Several schools expressed concerns about the uncertainty of future income streams, partly reflecting that funding is tied to actual take-up, which is somewhat unpredictable, as well as uncertainty about what funding will be available from local authorities. The Business Manager of School D echoed these concerns, though is expected to run at a surplus from their first year of working with funded two-year-olds, commenting:

*“You can only be cautious about what your income’s going to be. Because you can say “we’re going to buy these tables, these chairs, these toys, and so on”. And you can say “we’re going to employ these staff”,...and you know what your staffing costs are going to be. But you can’t guarantee that income in...It’s like any new company; it’s a gamble, isn’t it?”*

(Business manager, School D)

### **3.7.2 Financial planning and access to capital funding**

As noted in 3.2.1, some schools indicated that they would have welcomed more support from their local authority in the area of financial planning. For some, this had proved time consuming and a challenge, especially in the set up phase of provision. In another example, the Director of Early Years in School H reported spending a good deal of time writing bids to the local authority to help cover the costs of setting up provision, as this could not be fully covered by the hourly rate received for funded places.

Schools reported mixed experiences with the support they received from their local authorities while planning their provision. School B received substantial encouragement from their local authority to apply for capital funding to make changes to the building, and shared information about other grants available to help cover set up costs.

A perceived lack of clarity surrounding funding from the local authority was considered a challenge to planning the financial set up of provision in School E and G. Interviewees in School E reported the local authority were “slow to respond” regarding the eligibility criteria for funded places, which contributed to a delay in launching the provision while those in School G found it difficult to clarify what capital funding was available and how to apply for it. The Head Teacher of School G commented:

*“I only found out about capital funding for the two-year-old project from London, and then I was banging on with the local authority saying how do I apply for it...they had their own systems that they were trying to develop and get it out there, but there was always gaps between what I was hearing from London, and I was having to phone the people at local, the high up people at the local authority.”*  
(Head Teacher, School G)

The local authority representative for School A felt that the lack of capital funding in her area was a barrier to making the changes to the physical environment of a maintained school necessary to become a high quality setting for two-year-olds.

### **3.7.3 Payment mechanisms and arrangements**

A number of schools reported that they found upfront funding, as for the three- and four-year-old entitlements, easier to manage than payment in arrears system used for funded two-year-olds (Schools A, B, E, G). School B had an arrangement with their local authority to receive the money for places upfront, which made it “*a lot easier*” for them, but will be paid in arrears going forward. School D, an academy, invested £12,000 upfront to run the new provision. This covered running costs for the first three months until payments started coming in for the actual places. The provision is expected to run a surplus, part of which will go back to the academy trust to repay the investment. As of July 10, School G had not received any funding for the January-April term, and was owed over £6,000. School E described themselves as “*more cautious*” with the provision for two-year-olds compared to the places for three- and four- year-olds. Moreover, they find the local process more burdensome administratively, as the Finance Officer commented:

*“For two-year-olds, schools have to get parents to sign a paper form confirming receipt, and send hard copies to the local authority. Normal school places and three- and four-year-old provision don’t require this: school completes electronically, without parent’s input, and sends electronically to the local authority. It would be sensible for two year-old provision to be administered in a similar way, as the current way is disproportionately administratively intensive.”*

(Finance Officer, School E)

A number of schools stressed that they only received funding for the sessions two-year-olds actually attended, so drop-outs and absences due to illness, appointments or holidays became costly (Schools A, C, and G), as illustrated by the following comments:

*“You only get paid for the hours the children are actually in. So [children missing sessions] can have quite a negative impact on your funding.”*

(Head Teacher, School G)

*“[There are] parents who really want it and the child will be there on the dot at eight in the morning. Then you’ve got the parents who are just very hit and missy and then there are [parents who] just stop coming... We give them a couple of weeks leeway and then if we can’t get hold of them... the place is gone.”*

(Finance Officer, School A).

Other schools reported that their funding was based on enrolment, rather than attendance, which was seen as offering more stable revenue. However, the DfE plans to move to ‘participation funding’ from 2015-16 to bring the funding system for two-year-olds in line with that of the entitlement for three- and four-year-olds.<sup>12</sup> Local authorities may adjust payment mechanisms with providers in response.

School H had funding issues for children who turned three during the academic year. These children were not able to advance to the nursery until the following academic year, as all places were filled each September. The local authority offered to fund these three-year-olds as a pre-school play group, but at substantially lower funding which the school suggested would have made the provision unsustainable. Under these funding arrangements, the school suggested they would have needed to restrict admissions to children who turn two in the summer, which they were not willing to do. Most other schools reported having two or three intakes throughout the year, which seems to have allowed for smoother transitions to the three-year-old offer. These schools automatically transferred children to the three-year-old headcount at the appropriate time, after discussing options with parents, and did not report any interruption in funding.

A few schools reported that the funding they received from their local authority was sufficient to cover delivery costs, while others drew on surpluses in the general school budget, project funding from DfE, and revenue from fee-paying places to cover shortfalls. Some schools challenged the hourly rates their local authorities paid to schools for the funded places as being financially unsustainable (Schools B, G and H). The hourly rate paid to School B for two-year-olds was reported to be *“almost half of that for three year-olds”* by the Finance Officer. School H initially received £4.50 per hour from the local authority for funded two-year-olds, which was not considered sustainable, but at the time

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/323495/EY\\_Funding\\_ConDo c\\_-\\_Branded\\_final\\_with\\_foreword.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/323495/EY_Funding_ConDo c_-_Branded_final_with_foreword.pdf)

of the interview they were receiving £5.50. For the Director of Early Years in School H, this was a much needed change, and commented:

*“It’s completely different in a school. The standards are so different. So the funding has got to be different. And that’s what [the local authority] have recognised. We’re now on £5.50 per child and that’s sustainable on a tight line because that doesn’t allow for any resources, it purely allows for staffing.”*

(Director of Early Years, School H)

The Business Manager of School B highlighted the other costs associated with providing for two-year-olds:

*“It’s not so much the staffing, I think what they haven’t taken into consideration is all the other costs of running the nursery. They haven’t considered our overhead costs, heating, lighting, food, all those kind of things as well, and all the checks we have to do on the building and all the other obligations that we have to meet. It all comes at a cost.”*

(Business Manager, School B)

### **3.7.4 Staff costs**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, staff costs represented the biggest component of expenditure in setting up and delivering early education to two-year-olds, cited by all schools interviewed.

*“Staffing for everything in schools is 70% of your budget, that is where all our money goes. There really is only very small pots of money that are left aside to do anything else. It is just staffing.”*

(Finance Officer, School A)

High and rising staff costs were cited as an important risk to financial sustainability in the future, reflecting the need to hire additional staff to supplement ratios (Schools B and H) and/or expected salary increases to retain high quality staff going forward (School B and School G). Local authority and community schools in particular reported being bound by centrally set salary scales and terms and conditions, including automatic annual salary increments (School G), which do not apply to other nursery providers.

School D, an academy, moved key staff from hourly to salaried contracts to keep control of costs and cash flow. The school also offered incentive pay to key staff as a percentage of any profit, so staff shared motivation to keep costs contained and enrolment high.

*“There’s a business element to [staff ratios] and I think that’s a particular difficulty for the two-year-olds. Because the ratio is one to four it’s very difficult to be able to afford to put in high quality people there. Because we have the three- and four-year-olds and we’re able to generate some savings on budget there, it’s the only way we can afford to have that for the two- year-olds as well.”*

(Head Teacher, School D)

As reported in Section 3.3.4, a number of schools reported that some two-year-olds, especially those considered vulnerable, may need additional one-to-one attention from staff, over and above what can be accommodated by the standard ratio (at least one member of staff for every four children). A number of schools introduced home visits, which increased the amount of staff time spent engaging with families outside of the funded 15 hours per week. School B had initially included the manager as one of the staff included in calculating their staff ratio, but recruited an additional staff member to work directly with the children so the manager would have more time for working with parents and other duties. They also planned to apply to the local authority for additional funding for extra support beyond the 1:4 ratio.

Similarly, as discussed in Section 3.4.4, a number of schools implemented internal training to support ongoing development of the staff working with two-year-olds. Such ‘non-contact’ time was generally absorbed by the general school budget, though School H secured funding from the local authority for the additional staff training time. The Director of Early Years commented:

*“If this is going to be sustainable then the funding has to be completely reviewed...The only reasons we’ve been able to do what we’ve done is because I’ve applied for bids from the local authority and I have been lucky...What you are given per child is not enough.”*

(Head Teacher, School B)

### **3.7.5 Flexibility of the offer**

As reported in Section 3.3.5, many schools offered sessional provision with limited or no flexibility, so as to maintain high levels of capacity throughout the week and provide consistent routines for children. Others reported that parents in their area valued flexibility in the two year-old offer, which could present a number of operational challenges

(Schools A, C, D). The different approaches partly reflected differing needs among local parents, as working parents are more likely to benefit from and expect flexibility than families eligible for funded places.

As running sessions below capacity could be costly, it was considered important to manage the flow of children to keep the nursery full throughout the week and the year. School B offered some flexibility to parents, but did not fill the resulting vacancies and planned to prioritise funded places over fee-paying places. Schools A and D carefully monitored the ages of children in the nursery and discussed options with parents well in advance of children turning three. School D also offered holiday places to school families to fill vacancies in between terms.

School C experienced fluctuations in attendance, and funding, between term time and holidays, as highlighted by the Lead Early Years Practitioner:

*“When it’s term time, we hardly have any fee-paying two-year-olds, so our income for paid parents is a lot lower than it was two years ago. We relied on our fee-paying parents, and that was 52 weeks of the year. Whereas now we are going to struggle in the holidays because we have to stay open for our fee-paying but we don’t take much money and we don’t get the funding in.”*

(Early Years Practitioner, School C)

When setting fees, School A accounted for any spaces created as a result of offering flexible places to ensure staff costs are covered. For example, a child attending three full-days would leave an ‘empty’ space in the other four half-day sessions that the school may not be able to fill.

However, offering a mix of funded and fee-paying places could complicate the determination of fees, which may be less transparent and potentially confusing for parents, as highlighted by the Finance Officer in School A:

*“Unfortunately a lot of parents thought it was going to be a lot cheaper for them [to attend three full days] because they were going to get their 15 hours. But obviously because it’s a school and it’s three hours a day, it wasn’t. Whereas in the nursery, if it’s 15 hours and they want to do three full days they just pick three half days [to pay for]...but we can’t offer that place for those three hours if that child’s not with us anymore [in the school] to anyone else.”*

(Finance Officer, School A)

Additionally, there was variation in the price of sessions depending on the time of day and what meals would be provided, such as in School A, where afternoon sessions were cheaper than morning sessions because they provide breakfast and lunch in the morning, and just tea in the afternoon.

Finance officers also highlighted potential indirect costs associated with a fully flexible offer. For example, it could be complex to plan a curriculum that works for all of the different patterns of attendance and remains suitable for two-year-olds: children attending two or five days a week; children attending all day, mornings only or afternoons only. This may require more non-contact time for curriculum planning and monitoring relative to a standard sessional offer.

### 3.7.6 What did schools find useful in supporting financial sustainability?

- **Make a business plan:** Schools D and G highlighted the importance of a flexible business plan, with conservative planning assumptions. School G's business plan was based on 90% take-up of places. While the Business Manager in School D said *"We had a business plan, we knew what our costs were going to be going in fairly accurately. Some things have been a bit higher, some things have been a bit less. We're always adapting... We have a three year business plan which we flex obviously on a monthly and annual basis. We flex our plan but we're always thinking at least two years in advance of where we will be. So even if there was a drop in pupil numbers or an increase here, we've built in enough to protect us during the bumpy patches."*
- **Keep places full:** Operating below capacity dramatically increased the costs per child, with less revenue coming in. School A carefully monitored birth dates to anticipate upcoming transitions and potential vacancies well in advance and have agreed with their local authority to release places if children stop attending. School D marketed the nursery's high quality provision in the local area to ensure places are full. Schools followed-up with parents after any absences to encourage regular attendance.
- **Develop an admissions policy:** Schools took various approaches to allocating places to their provision. For example, School C operated on a first-come, first-served basis for two-year-olds, and would welcome guidance on whether either funded or fee-paying places should receive priority. School G considered factors like deprivation, experience with any siblings, and maintaining a social mix, with decisions taken by practitioners.
- **Streamline 'back office' functions:** School D shared some costs and back office functions with the school, which was considered more cost-effective than doing it themselves. They also switched from using Excel spreadsheets for invoicing and balancing income against costs to using a financial package, Sage, which streamlined the process and freed up staff time.
- **Contain delivery costs where possible:** School E initially hired agency staff on fixed term contracts, so they could see how things go before committing to hiring permanent staff. School D, an academy, moved key staff from hourly to salaried contracts to keep control of costs and cash flow.

## **4 Conclusions**

### **4.1 Overview**

Findings from the eight case study schools indicate that all of the schools had successfully developed and implemented provision for two-year-olds. Of these eight schools, four had not provided for two-year-olds prior to the demonstration project. Although often staff in these schools did have previous experience of working with two-year-olds in other settings and applied this knowledge and experience to the current school setting.

The findings from the case study interviews indicate that no one approach was developed by schools. Instead, the eight schools have developed provision for two-year-olds in a variety of ways to best meet the individual needs of the school and local community. Some are offering provision within a nursery with the main school building, while others are using nurseries attached to the school and some are delivering provision on a partnership basis with other onsite local providers. In the case study schools, the numbers of places offered for two-year-olds ranged from 8-34 places, and there were variations with regard to the mix of funded and fee-paying places and the flexibility of sessions, including part-time versus full-time places.

In developing their provision, schools are calling on a variety of resources, including the advice and support of their local authority, other early years providers and schools. An important influence in the delivery models being adopted is schools' perceptions of the needs of local families. Other influences include the strategic aims of the school, the resources/space available and also views as to what other provision for two-year-olds was available locally.

### **4.2 Delivering high quality provision in schools for two-year-olds**

All of the case study schools reported a strong commitment to providing high quality provision and, in their planning and development, appeared to be taking various steps to ensure this. There were clear indications of how schools had adjusted their practice to ensure a 'fit' with the needs of two-year-olds. The schools shared an overarching aim to support the learning and development of two-year-olds in advance of receiving their entitlement to free early education at three-years-old by supporting the development of key characteristics of learning. This was seen as especially important by those working in areas with high numbers of disadvantaged families. All stressed the importance of play and age-appropriate free flow and outdoor activities when designing a 'typical' day for a two-year-old, as well as the need to individually tailor activities to children's needs wherever possible. Those who lead the provision reflected that it was important to think

through the needs of two-year-olds and how they differed from children at different ages. All also highlighted that it was important to create a 'home away from home' environment.

Staffing of the provision for two-year-olds in the case study schools was comprised of a mix of early years professionals, teachers, managers and teaching assistants. Interviewees in all of the schools stressed the importance of high quality staff and, in five of the case studies, they had recruited new staff. However, in three schools, ensuring staffing of a high enough quality was considered a key challenge and this included having the finances to hire staff at the level deemed appropriate and needed by the school.

In terms of the knowledge and skills required of staff, these included, amongst other things, knowledge of two-year-olds and an understanding of their needs, knowledge of child development and an ability to work effectively with parents. All schools reported a commitment to support and train staff in these areas, including via regular internal training sessions.

Working with parents was considered 'vital' to delivering a high quality provision for two-year-olds and the case study schools all reported carrying out work to engage with parents. For example, many carried out home visits in advance of two-year-olds taking up a place. Such visits were reported to help in the building of a trusting relationship between school staff and parents. The schools also identified other useful activities for working with parents including creating opportunities to communicate with parents on a daily basis and consulting parents when planning activities.

### **4.3 Learning points for developing provision for two-year-olds in schools**

The findings from the case studies provide a variety of useful learning points for schools with regard to provision for two-year-olds and these include:

- **When setting up provision**, it is important to allow adequate time for planning and set up; it is also helpful to visit and create close links with the local authority and wider service providers and to consider local area needs.
- **When designing the environment and activities for two-year-olds**, it is important to draw on the experience of other settings; to consider the child as a whole and to think how the setting can closely mirror a homelike environment; to think about the extra support needs that some children may have and to also think about the needs of those attending for a full day when planning activities.
- **When thinking about the staffing of provision for two-year-olds**, it is important to ensure that staff feel part of the wider school and to ensure that regular training is scheduled for all staff, including supporting and up-skilling existing staff

members. It was also suggested that if the school is delivering the provision in partnership, opportunities to exchange training and knowledge should be pursued.

- **When working with parents**, schools should assess their strategies for working with parents; they should carry out home visits in advance of a child taking up a place; and they should include parents in their child's transition from home to the setting. A key theme of schools' learning was of the importance of working in partnership with parents as much as possible, of involving them in observations of their child's progress and, also, of creating links to wider services such as children's centres.

## 4.4 Challenges in the development of provision

A variety of challenges in developing provision were identified in the evaluation and these included the recruitment and retention of high quality staff and also the work required to develop appropriate and nurturing physical spaces for two-year-olds within existing school premises. However, possibly the area of greatest challenge concerned the financial sustainability of provision for two-year-olds within schools.

During the case study interviews, the views of school staff were sought concerning the economies of scale of the provision, the availability of capital funding and the financial implications of staffing arrangements and the degree of flexibility possible when offering places. Some of this information is still being gathered and/or analysed and will be reported on in the final evaluation report alongside the findings from the finance survey. From the case study visits, however, it was apparent that financial planning for the set up of the provision was considered time consuming and had been challenging for a number of the schools. There were, for example, variations and a lack of clarity surrounding the funding arrangements from local authorities, including the levels of hourly rates paid, the availability of capital funding and the amount of upfront funding available.

The biggest component of expenditure related to provision for two-year-olds was staff costs. It was noted that high and rising staff costs could be a significant risk to future financial sustainability, either due to the need to hire additional staff, and/or due to the need to fund salary increases in order to retain high quality staff. The introduction of home visits and other engagement activities with parents also have important financial implications.

Emerging from this aspect of the data gathering, there are a number of important pointers for helping schools to ensure that their provision for two-year-olds is financially sustainable. These include the importance of:

- schools developing a flexible business plan
- schools developing strategies to ensure that their places for two-year-olds are full and that they operate at capacity

- the need to develop an admissions policy and that, wherever possible, they work to contain their delivery costs.



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