



# Maternal and Child Health Network

## Policy Briefing 2:

### Early Years Education and Childcare

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### *MatCHNet Network Management Group*

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## Introduction

The Maternal and Child Health Network aims to harness cross-country administrative data to evaluate national policy impacts on maternal, infant and child health, and health inequalities across the 4 UK nations.

MatCHNet's briefings and reports provide baseline knowledge in the areas of policy, data, and methods relevant to early years policy evaluations.

*MatCHNet's policy briefings and reports* aim to compare early years policy variations across the 4 UK nations to highlight key differences in provision.

The policy series covers:

- welfare grants in pregnancy and early childhood
- early years education and childcare
- universal credit and welfare policies

## Early Years Education and Childcare

### Context

- Childcare provision is beneficial for pre-school children[1]. It enhances cognitive, behavioural, social, and physical development and lays the basis for future milestones.
- Evidence shows that early years childcare improves school readiness and can alleviate inequalities in early childhood development[2] and later life.
- Since the 1998 National Childcare Strategy, UK early years education and childcare provision has progressively expanded, with observable differences in the 4 UK nations[3-4].

**MatCHNet’s policy briefings aim to compare policy variations across the 4 UK nations. Here, we highlight variations in funded universal childcare provision, support for low-income families, and funding for early years providers.**

### UK early years education and childcare policies

- UK childcare provision includes universal, working (extended), and disadvantaged entitlements. For more information, please see our detailed policy comparisons in *MatCHNet Policy Report 2*.
- **Universal:** All 4 UK nations offer a universal entitlement for 38 weeks per year, ranging from 10-30 hours per week, for children aged 3-4.
- **Working:** working families are entitled to 30 hours per week in England (2017) and Wales (2019).
- **Disadvantaged:** All 4 UK nations offer extra provision for disadvantaged 2-year-old children.
- Since 2015, **extra support has been given to early years providers** to support disadvantaged 3-4-year-olds in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

**Table 1: Summary of UK early years education and childcare provision (hours per week)**

|  | England   | Wales  | Northern Ireland   | Scotland   |
|--|---|--|--|--|
|  | <i>Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)</i>            |  | <i>Pre-School Education Programme</i>  | <i>Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)</i>                          |
| 1. <i>Universal entitlement</i>        | 15 hours, aged 3-4, 38 weeks.                               | <i>Foundation Phase:</i> min. 10 hours/up to 30 hours <sup>1</sup> , aged 3-4, 39 weeks.     | 12.5 (PT) or 22.5 hours (FT), aged 3-4 (pre-school year only), 38 weeks.                                 | 30 hours (previously 16), aged 3-4, 38 weeks.                      |
| 2. <i>Working entitlement</i>          | 30 hours, aged 3-4, working families, 38 weeks.             | <i>Childcare Offer</i> <sup>1</sup> : 30 hours, aged 3-4, working families, 48 weeks.        |  |  |
| 3. <i>Disadvantaged entitlement</i>    | 15 hours, aged 2-3, low-income families, 38 weeks.          | <i>Flying Start:</i> 12.5 hours, aged 2-3, low-income families, 39 weeks plus extra support. | <i>Sure Start Development Programme:</i> 7.5 hours, aged 2-3 ('pre', pre-school year only), 38-40 weeks. | 30 hours (previously 16), aged 2-3, low-income families, 38 weeks. |
| 4. <i>Targeted Early Years funding</i> | <i>Early Years Pupil Premium:</i> aged 3-4, £302 per child. | <i>Early Years Pupil Development Grant:</i> aged 3-4, £1,150 per child.                      | <i>Pathway Fund:</i> up to £15,000 or £15-30,000 award per provider.                                     | No equivalent policy.  |

<sup>1</sup> Please see MatCHNet Policy Report 2 (table 2) for more information.

## What is different across the 4 UK nations?

### *Policy rationale*

- Provision focuses on preparing children for school (E&W, NI) or for life (S).
- Northern Ireland places are for pre-school education and not childcare purposes.

### *Eligibility*

- Universal provision in Northern Ireland is limited to children in their pre-school year, with places prioritised for socially disadvantaged children.

### *Intensity*

- Universal provision is currently highest in Scotland (30 hours per week).
- This compares to 15 hours in England; 10-30 hours in Wales; and 12.5 or 22.5 in Northern Ireland.
- Disadvantaged provision for 2-year-olds ranges from 7.5-30 hours per week.

### *Coverage*

- Entitlement (30 hours) for working families is more generous in Wales (48 weeks) compared to England (38 weeks).
- Disadvantaged provision for 2-year-old children is part of wider services in Northern Ireland (Sure Start) and Wales (Flying Start).

*Extra funding for early years providers in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.*

**Next steps:** There is a need to evaluate how differences in early years education and childcare policies potentially affect child health and development. Evaluations should focus on the **impact of varying levels** of early years education and childcare provision, **uptake levels**, and the **effectiveness of policies targeting low-income families**.

More information can be found at:  
[www.gla.ac.uk/matchnet](http://www.gla.ac.uk/matchnet) and on  
Twitter @MatCHNet\_



### Useful links

- England: [Every Child Matters](#), [Early Years Pupil Premium](#)
- Northern Ireland: [Pre-School Education Programme](#), [Pathway Fund](#), [Sure Start](#); [Sure Start Development Programme](#)
- Scotland: [Getting it Right for Every Child](#), [Early Education and Care](#)
- Wales: [Foundation Phase](#), [Flying Start](#), [Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant](#), [Curriculum for Wales](#)

### References

1. Hobbs, A. and R. Bernard, Early Childhood Education and Care, 2021. UK Parliament POST Number 649. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0649/POST-PN-0649.pdf>. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, London.
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3. Black, M., et al., Early Years Visual. 2018. University of Sheffield: Sheffield.
4. Sibieta, L. and J. Jerrim, A Comparison of School Institutions and Policies across the UK. 2021. Education Policy Institute and The Nuffield Foundation: <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EPI-UK-Institutions-Comparisons-2021.pdf>.



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