

Thurrock two-year old pilot: making a difference?

In 2010, Capacity was commissioned by Thurrock Council, to evaluate and evidence the short-term outcomes and impact of the pilot phase of the DCSF-funded free entitlement to early education and childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The evaluation was undertaken with the help of the Thurrock 2 Year Old Pilot Project Officer.

This short report focuses on the families who were selected to take part in the pilot, why they were considered to need support and what it has meant for their children.

The findings are extracted from a longer report to Thurrock Council which also examined the administration of the pilot, data-capture and referral processes and the contribution of multi-agency teams to the pilot. The methodology included review of all data systems, focus groups with partners and providers and qualitative interviews with twenty six parents.

Summary

The pilot has got off the ground quickly with all places currently filled. The children who are part of the pilot live in families which are on low incomes and in nearly two-thirds of cases, with no-one in work. The majority live in lone parent families and two-thirds have additional needs. More than half of the children live in neighbourhoods which fall within the higher three deciles of average deprivation; some live in homes subject to domestic violence and a small number in families affected by substance misuse.

The provision is highly flexible and the places offered have been of value, yielding benefits both for children's development and confidence and in terms of improved parenting. The parents interviewed are clear that the childcare places are helping their children in crucial ways.

Where the family support offer has been received, it has been valued by parents. Many would welcome other forms of wider family support, including help with gaining skills and qualifications, getting back to work, help with housing issues and help with children's behaviour. The specific types of support which families would like vary, with more workless families wanting help with gaining skills and qualifications and getting back to work.

Introduction

Since 1997, a free entitlement to early learning and childcare formed an integral element of previous government action to help parents to balance work and family life and to narrow the gap in outcomes between children who are disadvantaged by poverty and their better-off peers. Poverty has been shown, conclusively, to have the largest impact on outcomes in the early years.¹ Research evidence suggests that high-quality pre-school education can reduce the effects of disadvantage.²

From September 2009, all 152 local authorities in England have been funded to deliver a targeted offer to 15% of their most disadvantaged two-year olds, together with funding for outreach and family support. In total, 23,000 children are being funded in England.

The current roll-out is data-driven, the primary criteria relating to low-income indicators such as receipt of income support or the higher rate of Child Tax Credit. Local authorities are free to set further criteria relating to priority groups of families, e.g. lone parents, BME families or refugees; health or disability; safeguarding issues; and evidence of learning delay or emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The Thurrock Pilot

Thurrock has an allocation of 65 places which are currently filled. Selection is guided by the primary, income-based, criteria and a further set of secondary criteria. The secondary criteria cover a spectrum of family and/or child characteristics, including families living with disability; those experiencing domestic violence or substance misuse; teenage parents; children experiencing developmental delay, speech and language difficulties, or emotional or behavioural problems; and children living in temporary accommodation. Successful referrals must meet at least one criterion in each of the primary and secondary categories. Children must be aged two and are able to access a place in the term following their second birthday.

An earlier pilot, in 63 local authorities between 2006 and 2008, provided free early years education to 13,500 two-year olds. The evaluation of this national pilot found that the initiative was well targeted, reaching, in the main, disadvantaged children; parental satisfaction was high; and that quality of settings was, overall, adequate and in a fifth of cases good. On aggregate, the pilot did not significantly improve the cognitive and social development of the children taking part, but within those settings rated as high quality, the effect was to significantly improve children's language scores.

Smith, R. Purdon, S. Schneider, V. La Valle, I. Wollny, I Owen, R. Bryson, C. Mathers, S. Sylva, K. and Lloyd, E. (2009) Early education Pilot for Two-Year old Children: Evaluation DCSF –RR134

¹ C4EO (2009) Narrowing the gap in outcomes for young children through effective practices in the early years

² Sammons, P., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K. (2002). *Measuring the Impact of Pre-school on Children's Cognitive Progress Over the Pre-School Period* (EPPE Project Technical Paper 8a). London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Referrals are used and these come from a number of sources, including health visitors, family support teams, Portage workers and other specialist services, children's centres, childcare providers and social care professionals. The pilot is aligned to the Common Assessment Framework. A CAF assessment is required for each child receiving a place, unless the family being referred is already the subject of a Social Care Initial Assessment.³

Initially, places were allocated according to postcodes, but this was subsequently abandoned because of inflexibility, excluding children who were deemed to be in need of places, but who lived outside the most disadvantaged postcodes.

A referral form is used, which requires basic information relating to the eligibility of the child; contact details for the family; the name of the referring agency and person making the referral; an indication of who will take responsibility for the family support offer; the date of the CAF assessment; and a parental declaration of eligibility.

The referral form, together with the completed CAF assessment, is submitted to the Thurrock Multi-Agency Group (MAG). For those children subject to Social Care Initial Assessment, the referral form, together with an action plan, is submitted to the Thurrock Access to Resource Panel (TARP).

The family support offer is delivered by a range of agencies and professionals. The Thurrock Multi-Agency Group (MAG) and Thurrock Access to Resource Panel (TARP) are also supporting and co-ordinating this element of the offer.

³ Free Early Learning and Childcare-The Offer for Two-year-olds: How to make a referral. Thurrock Council 2009

Findings

Is the pilot reaching disadvantaged children?

The project database at the beginning of March 2010 shows that children live in families either on Income support, the higher rate of Child Tax Credit, Job Seekers Allowance, or Extra Working Tax Credit relating to a disability. There are a handful of children for whom confirmation of the primary criteria was not recorded but this has since been updated, confirming that all meet the income-related requirement.

In addition, the database records that, for seventeen children, disability or mental health issues affecting them or another family member were reasons for referral; seventeen children also live in families affected by domestic violence; fifteen children have speech and language needs; nine suffer from developmental delay; and nine have emotional or behavioural problems. In addition, two children live in temporary accommodation, two have teenage parents and one lives in a family affected by substance misuse.

Nineteen children (30%) are subject to more than one of these factors and among this group eight children (12%) are subject to three factors.

The children on the pilot are also, by and large, likely to live in more deprived areas of Thurrock.

The five most deprived wards in Thurrock are

- Tilbury St Chads
- Tilbury Riverside and Thurrock Park
- Belhus
- Chadwell St Mary and
- West Thurrock and South Stifford

At the time of review, accurate postcode data was available for fifty four children. Those children were recorded as living in thirteen of Thurrock's twenty wards, but with a concentration in four wards, viz.

The Thurrock pilot is clearly supporting children who are in need. This is validated by the project data and by the further information supplied by parents who were interviewed. A further positive feature is how quickly the project got off the ground with all places filled within a relatively short period of time.

Grays Riverside (19%); Grays Thurrock (17%); Tilbury Riverside & Thurrock Park (19%); and Ockendon (11%). There were no children recorded as living in Aveley and Uplands Ward and one child living in Belhus Ward.

Analysing down to the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) in which the children are resident, more than a quarter of the children are drawn from the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in Thurrock, with well over half living in neighbourhoods which fall within the higher three deciles of average deprivation.

In Thurrock as a whole, 16% of children live in a family where no-one is working. Among the families interviewed, two thirds of the children in those families lived in workless households.

Fig 1 IMD data LSOAs

LSOA IMD rank	Numbers of Children	% Children
10%	15	28%
20%	3	6%
30%	13	24%
40%	12	22%
50%	4	7%
60%	3	6%
70%	-	
80%	1	<2%
90%	4	7%

There has been a very low rate of response from two disadvantaged wards, suggesting some small gaps referrals or take-up.

Interviews with parents also confirm high levels of need among participating families. Nearly three-quarters of parents reported family incomes of £15,000 or less per year and two-thirds of the families interviewed had no-one in the family working. Among those families which had employment, only four had an adult in full-time work.

Almost two thirds of parents interviewed were lone parents. Among this group, all but three (82%) were unemployed and none were in full-time work.

Black minority ethnic parents interviewed represented 15% of the sample.

There are only two children on the pilot recorded as living with teenage parents. Thurrock has achieved an overall reduction of 34.7% against the 2010 target of 50% - nationally the figure has dropped just over 10% - but the teenage pregnancy rate is still above the Eastern region average

We have some very desperate parents of two-year-olds who are living very difficult lives: they see friends getting funding and wonder why they don't meet the criteria.

Childcare provider

Funding from government enables local authorities to offer early education and childcare to just 15% of disadvantaged two-year-olds. Thurrock has a population of 151,600 people; approximately 2,500 are two years old. Among all Thurrock children, poverty rates are slightly lower than the national average, but 21.2% are living in families in receipt of means-tested benefits.⁴

Partners and childcare providers were asked whether there were children in need not being reached. Childcare providers believed that there were many other families who could and should be supported – if more funding were available.

Is the pilot reaching families who are non-users of services?

It is well established that children from low income and some minority ethnic groups are less likely to use formal childcare. In addition, attitudes to childcare among low-income parents suggest that many do not find it personally relevant, because they associate it with working parents and those with no family members around to help.⁵

However, when the factor of cost is removed, families are more likely to make use of services. As a result of the free entitlement for three and four year olds, virtually all children aged four in England now participate in some early education and childcare. Among three-year-olds, 92% receive the free entitlement.⁶

⁴ Thurrock Health profile 2008 Association of Public Health Observatories

⁵ Speight, S. Smith, R. La Valle, I. Schneider, V. Perry, J. Coshall, C. and Tipping, S (2008) Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2008 DCSF-RR136

⁶ DCSF (2009) Provision for children under five years of age in England: January 2009 SFR11/2009

There is no expectation that all families which access the two year old offer have to be new to childcare, but local authorities need to ensure a focus on the most disadvantaged families in their areas.

Among parents interviewed in Thurrock, over half (60%) had used childcare in the past, either for the child in question or an older brother or sister.

Partner agencies confirmed this. Some were using the fund to support children who did not qualify for other types of childcare funding e.g. under the Early Support service.

Childcare providers, some of whom had been responsible for referrals, also confirmed that a number of children being supported were already known to them.

What does the package of family support offer include?

In addition to support for home learning, it is expected that parents of children with the two-year-old places will also have access to wider family support. The types of support highlighted in guidance include:

- Health advice
- Counselling
- Drug/alcohol support groups
- Housing advice
- Benefits advice
- Training (including targeted programmes such as family literacy, language and numeracy)
- Employment support
- Confidence building/ assertiveness training

In Thurrock, the family support offer for pilot families is still developing. Both childcare providers and partner agencies felt this was an area where communication between services and joint working could be improved.

Asked about the range of support services likely to be offered, partner agencies had mixed views. Where the offer of support was arranged by the Multi-agency Group

Some were new to childcare, but not to our service.

Health Visitor

Most of us are supporting families in need - in our own way - though our own pockets; we've done it for years. The two-year-old pilot is helping us, but we still have families who don't get funding. This is a start, but we hope it will be extended.

Childcare provider

(MAG), it was believed that help with housing and benefits would form part of the package. It was also felt that that the offer might in some cases include access to training and help to get back to work. Information packs, it was said, could also form part of the support offer.

Among the parents interviewed, over half were receiving support in the form of outreach or home visiting. Where support was available it was regarded as a positive benefit.

This support commonly pre-dated the pilot. Three parents had previously benefited from specialist support, like Portage, but this had come to an end.

Agencies involved in supporting pilot families included Social Care, Portage, Play Link Workers, Parental Outreach Workers, Health Visitors, Community Mums and Women's Aid. The frequency of visits ranged from weekly to "as needed".

Activities included toys and games, the opportunity to talk through issues and Portage.

Eight parents had received help with money matters; nine with workshops and courses; six with housing issues; six with health related issues; and five had accessed a Toy Library. One had enrolled on Wishes, a project to support parents to return to learning.

Eleven parents said they did not receive support in the form of outreach or home visiting. Nearly all of those parents had children with complex needs. One had previously had support from Portage and from her social worker.

Parents were asked about the areas of family life they might like help with. Only two parents felt that they needed no help. Among others, the combinations of types of help varied, but the main choices were help with gaining skills and qualifications (52%); help with children's behaviour (36%), help with housing issues (32%) and help in getting back to work (36%).

Getting all this support takes some of the strain off the family; we are calmer and feel supported, but disappointed by the delay in getting it.

She listened to me. She brought toys which the children really enjoyed. They like people coming round with different toys.

It was someone to talk to and listen, who gave advice, and you could let it all out.

I didn't know about the other support, it's probably an oversight because of existing support granted.

I have been able to keep the children safe.

I have more information and knowledge now on how to manage his autism.

I have someone to talk to and talk things through with.

Parents

Among workless parents, nearly three-quarters wanted help in gaining skills and qualifications and more than half wanted help in getting back to work.

Some parents, particularly those with children with medical conditions and disabilities, had very specific needs for help and those included help with transport and getting around and support for their children to attend swimming or other play activities.

How well is the childcare element working?

The free entitlement for two-year-olds provides up to three additional terms of early learning and care for children at an early point in their development. An added aim of the initiative is to encourage low-income families to take up the universal free entitlement when their children reach the age of three.

However, the actual amount of additional help which a two-year-old will receive will vary with the child's age at the date of referral and the availability of places.

The Thurrock pilot was only launched in September 2009. Among the children who were aged two at that time, four became eligible for the three-year-old entitlement in the spring term of 2010 and could receive therefore, at most, only one additional term of early education and childcare. A further seventeen became eligible in the summer term and could receive a maximum of two additional terms.

At the time of review in March 2010, ten children were either awaiting allocation to a provider or awaiting a start date. Of these, half were summer-born children who would become eligible for a three-year-old place in the autumn of 2010. There are childcare sufficiency issues in some parts of Thurrock.

Among the families interviewed, the maximum period for which any child would have the two-year-old place ranged from one term to three terms. The average was two terms. At the time of interview, the maximum time any child had been in the place was two terms, but the commonest was one term.

Babysitting for hospital appointments, we have terrible trouble getting a babysitter to go out ...and help with bad days.

I'd like help to be able to take children out. I can just about manage going to shops because they're in the buggy, but not the park, ball pit or swimming.

I'd love to get back to work

Childcare providers are very supportive of the pilot because of its focus on supporting families who might not otherwise access provision. Many had sought, proactively, to be part of the pilot and were already supporting children from within their own funds.

There was a consensus that the support provided by the local authority had been helpful. The main issue identified was the additional support found to be necessary for some of the children placed; their needs requiring a higher staff/child ratio.

Most felt that the funding was adequate; others that it did not cover additional costs such as the higher staff/child ratios, where these were not funded separately, or the cost of attending meetings about children on the pilot.

Some were concerned that the funding did not cover the periods when a place was kept open for a child or during the holidays and other times when children did not attend. The funding only covered thirty eight weeks while the settings were open all year round.

Among providers, there was a consensus that children were deriving observable benefits across all areas of learning and development.

Partner agencies agreed that the childcare places had been beneficial for children.

Providers were asked about the best way of reporting progress relating to referred children. All said that they shared information with parents on a regular basis, but used different record-keeping systems; some derived from local or national quality assurance schemes.

In principle there was agreement for a common record-keeping system, based on information already captured through planning and observation tools.

Has the pilot made a difference for children?

Childcare providers and partner agencies were confident that the pilot was making a difference. Parents thought so too and all but one felt the help provided for their children was crucial to their development and well-being.

Big impact on families themselves, Parents have more confidence to deal with other issues, they are not isolated and they get support from other parents.

Childcare provider

His play skills are much better whereas before he'd just lie there, now he reaches and crawls for things.

Yes, he's slowly getting more confident, talking more and getting on better with his brother, they actually have little conversations together

Messy play has been really good as it's helped him be better with finger food, before messy play he wouldn't pick up finger food... we've got shaving foam and moon sand and from different textures it's really helped with his food.

Parents

Asked about the types of improvements achieved by their children, the main areas mentioned were general development, including speech and language and socialisation and opportunities to make friendships with other children.

Fig 2 Types of benefits N = 25

Type of benefit	
Child development	72%
Improvements in behaviour	20%
Socialisation and friendship	68%
Access to new activities	28%
Support for SEN	44%

In most cases, parents could articulate those benefits in terms of small changes or improvements in speech and language, sociability, or reduced negative behaviours.

Among parents with children with complex needs or disabilities, the opportunities to have contact with other children were held as particularly valuable. While parents could see that their children were benefiting from early education and childcare, the respite which this afforded them was cited by many as an equally important factor, making them feel more confident and better able to parent.

What parents want from childcare

Parents had clear views of what were the most important features of a childcare setting. The most important feature was their children being happy, followed by safety, followed by the opportunity to learn social or behavioural skills followed by accessibility. Five parents regarded high quality play as the most important feature.

She's a lot more confident and she's good with moving, moving is definitely her strong point, she can take eight steps.

Yes, he's talking more and getting on better with his brother, they actually have little conversations together

I have routine, when I pick them up I get a buzz from seeing them. My face lights up.

It has made our relationship better, we play together and he has good social skills.

Having staff that keep you up to date with what's going on; one where they have a good routine and involve children in it.

The staff are fantastic

Parents

Fig3 Childcare most important N=22

Childcare most important	
Child Happy	50%
Safety	44%
Socialisation and behaviour	28%
Accessibility	24%
High Quality Play	20%

The relationship with staff is also a key factor for parents.

Nearly all parents intended to continue to access early education and childcare when their children reached the age when they became eligible for the three-year-old and four-year-old entitlements. Fewer than half, however, thought that they would continue to use the same provider, the others anticipating that their children would have school places.

Impact on home environment

DCSF guidance underlines the expectation that the pilot will include support for the home learning environment. Parents are to be encouraged to “play with their children at home using letters and numbers, to read to their children, or to visit the library with them”.

Participating childcare providers and partner agencies believe that the pilot is being successful in this respect in at least some cases.

Parents were asked if they attended the childcare setting with their child. Most, but not all, had visited the settings before their children had attended and fewer than half had visited after the start date. Nine had not visited at all after the start date and one wanted to make a visit.

I’m not sure, I’ll check what activities they do at this age and then decide from there. I might change I might not.

Yes, because he’s settled and I’m not sure about the school, I don’t want to disturb him

Before he started I would wipe his nose, now I ask him to get a tissue because that’s what the nursery does.

I now read more to the children and sing songs she has learnt at playschool.

I have more time to play when they get home, because I’ve got my work done. I feel more confident as a mum.

Not really, I’ve got the same bond, plus I knew quite a lot from parenting groups.

Parents

Nonetheless, more than half of parents felt that the childcare place had influenced the home environment and/or the ways in which they played with their children.

Among those who felt there had no effect on the home environment some felt that they were already playing very effectively with their children or, conversely, that this was the job of the nursery.

Parents' understandings of why they have been offered childcare places

Most, though not all, parents were clear why they had been offered a free two-year-old place. In many cases they understood it was related to having a child with special needs and was, therefore, an additional form of help with this.

In other cases, parents had asked for help themselves or the need had been picked up by a health visitor. A small number of parents had been supported by childcare providers to obtain funded places.

Those parents receiving family support also had an understanding of why this had been offered, but this varied from being very clear to being partially understood.

Conclusion:

The evaluation to date has confirmed that the two-year-old pilot is supporting some very disadvantaged children to achieve better outcomes. Many of their families are coping with poverty, disability and a range of other challenging circumstances. Without the pilot it is highly unlikely that these children would have the opportunity to attend a nursery or pre-school.

In addition parents have had much needed respite and in some cases, additional forms of support, whether play in the home, resolving housing issues or help to work towards developmental goals for their children.

This has been a short and relatively limited evaluation but even with these constraints has illuminated a richness of data to underline the value of the two-year-old pilot in Thurrock.

My social worker said that I could get some support. She said that there are different demands of a child with special needs and she helped loads...

I think it was to do with parents similar to me, I mean parents that would benefit because of special needs in the family... yes was mainly due to my daughter's special needs.

I asked for a place; it provides me with some time to do things as I am on my own with the children.

Parents