



Department
for Education

The evaluation of two pilots for the 30 hours free childcare policy

Presentation to the SRA Annual Conference

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Overview of presentation

1. Policy context
2. Design of pilots and evaluations
3. Summary findings
4. Challenges, successes and lessons learned

Policy context

- In September 2017, the Free Early Education Entitlement for three and four year olds was extended from 15 to 30 hours for children of working parents in England
- The 30 hours programme will support around 400,000 working parents with the cost of childcare, saving parents using the full entitlement around £5,000 per year in total
- The Government will be investing more than £1 billion extra per year by 2019 to 2020 to fund the free childcare entitlements, bringing the total investment on free childcare to around £6 billion a year
- Primary objective is to support parents to work or to work longer hours through a reduction in childcare costs for working parents and by driving greater flexibility in, and improving accessibility to, childcare provision

Design of pilots and evaluations

Early Implementation: Sept '16-Jul '17

- 8 Local Authorities (LAs): one with full implementation, the others with partial implementation
- Testing sufficiency, take-up and initial indications of impacts plus additional aims around improving efficiency, meeting work needs and supporting parents to work

Early Rollout: April-Aug 2017

- 4 LAs delivering extended places to all eligible children in their area, purposely selected to test a range of conditions
- Focus on testing sufficiency and take-up

Evaluation methodology

- In-depth case studies with each of the LAs undertaking EI and ER – including interviews with LA representatives, childcare providers and parents
- A large-scale survey with all delivering providers for EI and all registered providers for ER
- EI had an ad hoc stats data collection matched to census data, a parents survey and case studies with innovator LAs
- ER had data collected from each LA on registered childcare providers, parent applications for the extended hours and headcount data on the use of places

Summary findings

- Indications were that the national rollout would be a success:
 - A **high proportion of childcare providers were willing and able** to offer the extended hours places and there was **no evidence that financial implications were a substantial barrier** to the delivery of extended hours
 - **Parents were keen** to take-up the extended hours
- Other provision had not been displaced, e.g. free 15 hours, 2 year old offer
- Most providers (90%) offered some choice in how parents could use hours
- Nearly a fifth (17%) delivering extended hours introduced or increased additional charges (higher for private providers and childminders) for meals, extras, admin.
- There were some positive initial impacts:
 - Take-up of the extended hours associated with **increases in the use of formal childcare; longer work hours for mothers and fathers;** and some indication of **higher work retention for mothers**
 - There were additional perceived benefits for families in terms of **enhanced work opportunities, direct financial support** and **broader wellbeing**

Challenge 1 – Analysis of official statistics

Objective: To use the 2016 and 2017 census returns from early years providers and schools to analyse delivery of places and impacts on providers.

Challenges?

- Data arrived later than planned.
- Unexpected matching of children across providers needed.
- Data for some questions had not been analysed previously.
- Analysis had to be officially signed off for publication

Successful:

- Most tables ready in time.
- No problems with sign-off.

But some analysis not possible due to:

- Inconsistencies in data between years.
- Insufficient time to clean previously unused data

Lessons learned?

- Contingency in timeline and staff resources essential.
- Be wary of previously unused data.
- Official sign-off can be parsimonious.

Challenge 2 – Identifying a sampling frame for parents

Objective: To identify a sampling frame of parents who were eligible for the policy but had not made an application.

Challenges?

- Very specific parent group required (child age, parent work, LA, not applied).
- No available data source with required information.
- Screening from children of required age in selected LAs – potentially very costly as unknown proportion meeting requirements.

Not successful: no sampling frame could be identified.

- Insufficient time to test alternative approach to identify sample through childcare providers.

Lessons learned?

- Consider long term development of administrative data to deliver sampling frames like this (issues of consent and data protection).

Challenge 3 – Maximising survey response

Objective: To maximise the responses rates from surveys of providers and parents in order to maximise sample sizes and minimise any response bias.

Challenges?

- Survey of early years providers and schools who tend to be inundated with surveys and other requests.
- Survey of busy working parents with young children.

Successful: high response rates:

- 80 percent and 76 percent for two providers surveys.
- 69 percent for parents survey.

Lessons learned: successful strategies:

- Importance and influence of research stressed.
- Time to complete survey kept short.
- Mixed mode of online / telephone to target staff resources.
- LAs promoted survey response through providers.

But also: these groups interested and motivated to respond.

Challenge 4 – Identifying impact

Objective: To identify impact of policy on childcare choices and parent work.

Challenges?

- Identifying a counterfactual sample from LAs without the policy highly problematic (similar to challenge 2) and would increase evaluation costs.
- Insufficient samples of treated group in regular surveys (and could not be available in time).

Limited success (?): Alternative data on proxies of impact collected:

- Change since policy introduction (but child is aging and driving change).
- Parents' perception of impacts (but may overstate importance of policy).

Lessons learned?

- Robust measures of impact may require expense of collecting data for counterfactual sample if such a sample can be identified.

Challenge 5 – Negotiating on conclusions

Objective: To produce a final report with a set of findings and interpretation of evidence agreed by commissioners and evaluators.

Challenges?

- Giving / incorporating feedback takes time and resources.
- Interpretation of quantitative evidence influenced by prior expectations.
- Weight given to qualitative evidence is subjective.
- Conflict between length and representing all interests.
- Concerns on how findings will be used (from commissioners and evaluation participants).

Successful (in the end):

- Some compromises but findings broadly supported by all parties.

Lessons learned?

- Need for agreed timeline and process (and complied with).
- To support independence, may help to agree that objectives / scope of research determined by commissioners, but responsibility for findings ultimately lies with report authors.

Working together / dissemination

- Good example of joint working – Department for Education research team, policy colleagues, independent evaluators and delivery partners
- Strong policy engagement throughout – commissioning, design, implementation, review of outputs, dissemination
- Demand for results came from the top to provide evidence that policy would be a success
- Rapid dissemination of results to inform national rollout of policy – interim and early findings as well as final report and presentations
- Evaluation findings have had considerable impact on the implementation and development of the policy and informed the national, local (LA) and micro (childcare provider) level delivery of 30 hours
- Learning from the evaluations is informing the new evaluation of national rollout

Impact of EI and ER findings/recommendations

- To reassure Secretary of State and others that rollout of 30 hours would be a success
- To help understand parental demand/uptake
- EI evidence informed the updated operational guidance for childcare providers, e.g. on charging for extra items/activities
- Reassurance that the policy had no impact on existing free entitlements
- To provide LAs with further support
- To help understand the impact on parents
- The increase in working hours was important to confirm what we believed could be the case from academic work (IFF and Frontier Economics impact feasibility report)
- Developing LA IT systems and also learning from LA that trialled the HMRC system
- Findings used in reactive press briefings, Ministerial speeches, Parliamentary Questions and parliamentary debates

Evaluations of Early Implementation and Early Rollout of the 30 Hours Free Childcare

The evaluation team (key staff) consists of:

- Frontier Economics (Gillian Paull, Brian Higgins)
- Qualitative research team (Ivana La Valle and Eva Lloyd, University of East London, and Clarissa White, Independent Researcher)
- NatCen Social Research (Svetlana Speight, Hannah Jones, Lydia Marshall)

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REFERENCES

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