



Two Decades of Reading: an analysis of English policy affecting literacy 1997-2016

A literature review by Kiran Gill for Read On. Get On.

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Introduction

Before the Read on, Get on campaign charts a path forward in addressing illiteracy in the UK, it is important to have a clear understanding of what has happened to date: the progress made, lessons learnt and challenges which have arisen. This paper provides that knowledge through examining policy and practice in England over the past two decades.

Each chapter covers a policy area affecting children's language development: primary school; early education; and child and family services. Within each chapter, there is a section summarising policy developments under the New Labour governments, 1997-2010, and a second on policy under the Coalition government, 2010-2015. Our final chapter outlines lessons learnt, policy developments under the Conservative government and the future opportunities for the ROGO campaign.

Chapter One: Primary School
<p>Purpose</p> <p>This chapter focuses on school policy affecting children aged 5-11. It explores initiatives aimed at the <i>what</i>, <i>who</i> and <i>how</i> of teaching reading at primary level in England. Sections explore changes in <i>what</i> was taught; policy to increase capacity and address professional development in <i>who</i> was teaching; and accountability over the period, examining <i>how</i> schools were held to account, particularly for the outcomes of their children not yet reaching a 'good' level of literacy by age 11.</p>
<p>Findings</p> <p>A strong strategy to raise national literacy rates under New Labour disseminated best practice in how to teach reading and created an infrastructure for accountability. Outcomes rose rapidly, and then stagnated. Under the Coalition, best practice was disseminated further, plugging a gap in phonics instruction. Accountability became more robust in holding schools to account for all children, including those falling behind in their reading. Outcomes rose again over the period but by 2015, professional capacity challenges, a lack of school improvement infrastructure and widening regional inequality threatened ongoing progress towards the ROGO goal.</p>
Chapter Two: Early Years
<p>Purpose</p> <p>This chapter focuses on early years policy affecting children aged 3-4. It explores initiatives aimed at the <i>how</i>, <i>what</i> and <i>who</i> of early years education towards improved literacy. The first section explores <i>how</i> access to quality early education grew over the two eras of government; examines <i>what</i> was taught in the early years, including the accountability for settings delivering this content; and how <i>who</i> taught in early years settings changes due to policy aimed at increasing professional knowledge and qualifications.</p>
<p>Findings</p> <p>In New Labour early years policy, the primary focus was reducing child poverty through increasing access to childcare so that parents could work. Although access increased drastically, understanding of how to improve literacy rates through quality took longer to develop. When the importance of staff qualifications was realised, a strong strategy set out how to upskill the workforce, with positive results.</p> <p>Under the Coalition, the curriculum was strengthened and providers were made more accountable to parents in its delivery. However, reforms to local authority roles reduced accountability and training opportunities; targets for professional development to drive quality were dropped. During this period, child poverty rose and the outcomes gap between poorer and more affluent children stagnated.</p>

Chapter Three: Child & Family Services

Purpose

This chapter focuses on health and early years policy affecting families with children aged 0-2. The first section explores policies supporting *parenting*, as the factor which makes the biggest difference in early language outcomes. The second section explores *health* policy and initiatives over the two eras which aimed to improve the identification and treatment of children whose language was developing irregularly. The third section explores *education* of children aged 0-2, including policies to drive up the Home Learning Environment, the childcare market for the youngest children and its cost and quality.

Findings

Poverty can affect parents' mental health, in turn having a profound effect on a child's cognitive and linguistic development. Children living in relative and absolute poverty reduced over New Labour's time in government, although the goal of eliminating child poverty was not met. Less was known about how to effectively break the link between income poverty and parenting/the home learning environment, although interventions through Sure Start and health visiting services (including Family Nurse Partnerships) had some positive impacts on children's literacy levels in disadvantaged subgroups.

Research did make clear that quality early education from age 1 could counter socio-economic differences. However, across the New Labour and Coalition periods, the quality of early education and childcare for children 0-2 was poor. Expansion of free childcare for deprived families was in low quality settings, meanwhile cuts to local authority spending led to fewer resources to support parenting skills in low income areas and to address speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Looking Forward

Purpose

In the final section of each chapter, policy change since the 2015 General Election is summarised and the challenges and opportunities facing ROGO are set out in terms of working towards the goal of ending illiteracy in England.

Findings

To ensure every child reads well at age 11, the new government must focus on building best practice in teaching and a targeting of accountability and resources to the most vulnerable under-achievers in left behind areas. The 2016 Education White Paper details potential for collaboration and re-focusing resources on schools most in need. However, the simultaneous challenges of curricula, assessment, accountability and school structure reform, alongside cuts to education funding and a shortfall in teacher and leadership recruitment, could jeopardise this next step.

To see every child with a good level of development at age 5, early years policy requires the clear goals, robust accountability, and strategy for universal staff development which the primary sector has benefitted from. Looking ahead, settings – particularly in poorer areas – face challenges in coping with longer entitlement hours, increased staff costs and reduced support in professional development. Quality cannot be improved without adequate funding. Government must renew a commitment to quality in the early years, as part of its social mobility agenda..

To reduce the literacy and communication gap which can already be seen by age 3, infant and family services require investment similar to that seen in the early years sector: an expansion of universal, state-funded childcare for children aged 1-3 to the poorest communities; a professional development plan for education, children's services and healthcare professionals focused on boosting children's attachment, communication skills and language exposure. Moving forward, cuts to local spending, a rise in acute need and the financial pressure on settings catering to

infants risk those in the poorest, most vulnerable families continuing to miss out on the support they need.

Advances in policy affecting all age groups will be undermined if the dramatic rise in child poverty is not addressed. This is projected to reach levels close to those in 1997, if a quarter of the nation's children are growing up in poverty by 2025. In this case, the socio-economic literacy gap will not close, but widen. The new government must make reducing child poverty a priority.

Glossary of Terms

BAS – British Ability Scale
CPD – Continuing Professional Development
DCLG – Department for Communities and Local Government
DfES, DCSF, DfE – Department for Education and Skills; Department for Children, Schools, and Family; Department for Education
DoH – Department of Health
DWP – Department of Work and Pensions
EAZ – Education Action Zones
ECM – Every Child Matters
EEC – Early Excellence Centres
EHCP – Education Health Care Plan
EiC – Excellence in Cities
EPPE – Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage
EYFSP, FSP – Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, Foundation Stage Profile
EYP, EYT, EYTS – Early Years Professional, Early Years Teacher, Early Years Teacher Status
FNP – Family Nurse Partnership
FSM – Free School Meals
GLD – Good Level of Development
HV – Health Visitors
KS1, KS2 – Key Stage One; Key Stage Two
LAC – Looked After Children
LEA, LA – Local Education Authority; Local Authority
MATs – Multi-Academy Trusts
NAO – National Audit Office
NESS – National Evaluation of Sure Start
NFER – National Foundation for Education Research
NLP – National Literacy Project
NLS – National Literacy Strategy
NNI – Neighbour Nursery Initiative
PbR – Payment by Results
PCT – Primary Care Trust
PNS – Primary National Strategy
PVI – Private, Voluntary, and Independent (providers)
PSC – Phonics Screening Check
QTS – Qualified Teacher Status
RR – Reading Recovery
RSC – Regional School Commissioners
SATs – Standardised Assessment Tests
SEN(D) – Special Educational Needs (and Disabilities)
SLCN – Speech, Language, and Communication Needs
SLT – Senior Leadership Team
SSLP – Sure Start Leadership Programmes
SVR – Simple View of Reading
TSA – Teaching School Alliances
UPN – Unique Pupil Number

Primary school

Literacy under New Labour

In headline terms, the literacy policies of the '90s seem to have had long term impact on schools' capability to teach children to read by age 11. Whilst illiteracy was not eradicated and certain groups and geographical areas ended the period of government underperforming compared to others, there was nonetheless a dramatic rise in standards across groups and areas, with 75,000 more pupils each year achieving a good level in reading by the time they left primary school.¹

Key Strengths	Tensions & Challenges
What: The Teaching of Reading	
The workforce was upskilled through specialist-designed content in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS).	The pedagogical emphases in curriculum materials led to the development of some reading skills whilst others, just as crucial, were side-lined.
Who: Professional Development and Capacity Building	
The 'cascade' model of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in the NLS, alongside investment in local leadership and school literacy leadership helped build expertise across the system. This was complemented by later programmes including Excellence in Cities (EIC) and Education Action Zones (EAZs) to scaffold collaboration, particularly in areas of educational underperformance.	Local infrastructure and professional development were crucial in improving standards in the country's big cities, but this was not consistent across the country. Policies transformed some areas of historical educational underachievement, but left a new geographical inequality in professional capacity and pupil achievement, particularly in the reading skills of deprived children.
How: Accountability for Reading	
A context of national and school-level accountability created alignment between the leadership goals at school, local and national levels through the implementation of national targets. Consequently, there was a steady trend of improvement in national outcomes. At the time New Labour came to power, approximately 2 in 5 pupils aged 11 were not meeting age-expectations in reading. By the time they left government, this had been halved with approximately 80% of all pupils achieving age-expectations in reading.	Threshold targets as an accountability measure meant that there was a focus on moving the majority of pupils over a grade boundary, but less incentive to invest in the progress of all children - including those who had fallen furthest behind. Funding and new interventions were put in place to improve outcomes for underperforming groups. However, a significant 'tail' of underperformance in reading remained at the end of this policy period, with many pupils, especially those with Special Education Needs (SEN), falling through the wide mesh of the standards agenda net.

The National Literacy Strategy

In the 1990s there was much public concern about the quality of state schooling, particularly in inner-city areas. Structural reform under Thatcher and Major had seen the introduction of per pupil funding, a National Curriculum, league tables and an extension of Her Majesty's Inspectorate to raise standards through increased accountability in the context of school-to-school competition. These mechanisms also served to highlight large numbers of pupils leaving school with little or poor qualifications and the newly powerful inspectorate's frequent reports² commented on the causes of underperformance, including the lack of "systematic programmes for the teaching of reading".³ New Labour was swept to power promising to invest in education. In opposition they had already appointed a Literacy Task Force and once in government they immediately set about developing a set of National Strategies, focusing on key areas of weakness in the education system. The most prominent was the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), launched in 1998.

New Labour set an ambitious national target that 80% of 11 year olds would meet the 'expected standard' in English by 2002. NLS architect, Professor Michael Barber, retrospectively characterised the strategy as 'high challenge, high support' in relation to six key elements: ambitious standards; good data and clear targets; accountability; access to best practice and quality professional development; devolved responsibility; and intervention in inverse proportion to success (low-performing schools receiving extra attention).⁴ Rather than simply increasing the pressure on schools to meet targets, the intention was to use resources created by experts, high quality training and improved working conditions as mechanisms to engage teachers and raise their expectations and skills in teaching literacy.⁵

Sceptics of the NLS' success have questioned the extent to which the specific programme and its method of teaching reading can be isolated from other policies affecting education at the time. Some critics have claimed that much of the gain in reading achievement occurred pre-1998, suggesting that improvement was due to the wider policy reforms, pre-dating the initiative. While it is undoubtedly the case that the upward trend in English results began prior to 1998 (with an increase of national proportion of children achieving Level 4 and above aged 11 rising from 48 per cent in 1995 to 57 per cent in 1996, up to 63 per cent by 1997) there are a number of recent studies which appear to successfully isolate the impact of the Literacy Hour (the key policy of the NLS) and to demonstrate its particular effectiveness.

One such study was conducted by the London School of Economics (LSE) Centre for the Economics of Education. The Literacy Hour of the NLS was modelled on a similar predecessor policy under the Conservative government: The National Literacy Project (NLP). The programme, which ran in inner-city areas of high deprivation from 1996-1998, included a daily hour of teaching time with carefully planned content and structure, combined with initial training and ongoing advice. LSE analysis matched participating schools with a group of similar schools not participating in the project (acting as a natural control group). The study illustrated improved performance for all primary schools in England but demonstrated statistically significant gains for the NLP schools over and above national improvement. Controlling for a large number of factors, the authors concluded that results 'are highly supportive of the hypothesis that the literacy hour, via the NLP policy, significantly improved the acquisition of literacy skills'.⁶

More recent research into the high educational outcomes of city schools, particularly those in London, have also pointed to the NLS' contribution as a key factor.

Although the ambitious 2002 target was not met by the end of Labour's first terms in office, there was a substantial rise in Key Stage 2 (KS2) test scores over this period. In 1997, 63 per cent of pupils achieved a Level 4^a in English (both reading and writing). By 2000 this had risen to 75 per cent, remaining stable until 2003. In reading, scores rose from 68 per cent in 1997 to a high of 83 per cent in 2000, fluctuating between 81 and 80 per cent thereafter.

Table 1.1: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving level 4 in Key Stage 2 English and Reading tests 1995* to 2002

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Reading	-	-	67	71	78	83	81	80
Writing	-	-	54	52	54	55	57	60
English	48	57	63	64	70	75	75	75

*The reading and writing components were not separately available for the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests taken in 1995 and 1996.

Doubtful of such impressive headlines, some questioned whether government data was giving a precise picture of literacy improvement. At the time of the rise in the results, Professor Peter Tymms of the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre argued that a 'political background of enormous pressure' to see year-on-year rises was leading to grade inflation. The *Comparability Over Time* project undertook an experiment^b which confirmed that roughly half of the percentage increase in attainment was due to grade inflation. However, the authors agreed that despite this 'substantial real improvements in children's achievement' had been made over the period 1996 to 2000.⁷

What: The Teaching of Reading

In terms of professional development and access to best practice, the NLS responded to concerns about the teaching of reading by introducing a daily Literacy Hour to be taught in primary schools and publishing a set of detailed guidance and resources on the structure, content and delivery of these lessons. Prior to the NLS, children were often taught to read by being listened to individually and by hearing the teacher read aloud. The Literacy Hour, introduced from September 1998, encouraged more explicit teaching of reading techniques; whole class teaching and modelling; a closer linking of reading and writing skills; and more synthetic phonics (word decoding) as part of a systematic teaching of reading.⁸

A team from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) were taken on as independent evaluators through the four year NLS project. Halfway through the four-year programme, the academics took stock of the success to date. In their research sample of

^a Level 4 was set as the benchmark of an age-appropriate expected level at the end of Primary School

^b Copies of earlier and later national tests were administered to randomly assigned groups of children in Northern Ireland. It was found that roughly half the gains in reading and hence in English at KS2 between 1996 and 2000 can be attributed to easier questions in the test papers and that the 'real' level of performance in KS2 English tests in 2000 was around 66 per cent, rather than 75 per cent. This test showed that beyond the effect of inflation there was a robust and significant rise of approximately nine percentage points in reading attainment.

500 schools, OISE/UT noted that teachers and headteachers reported learning new subject knowledge and skills through the strategies, illustrated in this quotation from a headteacher:

“We are an inner city school and, quite frankly, our teachers didn’t know how to teach these children. Now they have some techniques and feel supported.”⁹

However, the academics noted that they felt “a good part of the initial gains in achievement scores may be a function of relatively superficial (albeit effective) changes in teaching practice” and that in some observed instances the principles behind the teaching “were clearly not understood by the teacher”.¹⁰ They concluded that the challenge to exceed the achievement to date was to “increase the numbers of teachers who are expert”,¹¹ embed deep learning in teachers and to ensure an ownership of the strategies by the profession.

A research project spanning 2003-2006 looked into teachers’ classroom practice and found evidence of this ‘ownership’ of the strategies, after they had officially ended. There had previously been criticism of the ‘painting by numbers’ pedagogical prescription of the NLS and complaints that it had undermined teacher professionalism.¹² However, the authors of the large scale qualitative research project argued their fieldwork suggested the opposite effect.¹³ The study, financed by teachers’ union ATL, replicated one a decade earlier, visiting the same sample of 50 schools to investigate how classroom practice had changed as a result of the NLS.¹⁴ The authors’ key findings were that teachers’ perceptions of their own practice had shifted dramatically as a result of the strategies. Interviews over four years revealed teachers felt their practice “had changed and improved”¹⁵ and that this had made them more, not less, professional. Researchers described significant change in the sharing of learning objectives, structured lesson planning, the consequent pace of lessons and of learning, and the consistency of whole-class interactive teaching styles (which replaced the previous status quo of pupils having choice over activities and progressing through tasks and topics at their own pace). The research recorded teachers’ perceptions that they were more focused on pupils’ learning and that the tools from the strategies had developed their teaching practice beyond literacy and numeracy. Teachers also reported improved pupil motivation, pupil learning and an increased sense of their own effectiveness as teachers. The research indicated that short-term loss of morale as a result of the strategy grew into overall increased confidence, as teachers became better at using the NLS resources.

The research authors compared their findings to similar studies of practice in the ‘70s and ‘80s which seemed to evidence that, despite large policy change, little altered in classroom practice. That study had concluded that “The National Curriculum was, in effect, a technical innovation that was imposed on teachers, with little or no guidance as to how to implement it. In this situation, it is hardly surprising that teachers drew upon familiar, tried-and-tested practice.”¹⁶ This has significant implications for the effectiveness of NLS in changing teacher practice. It seems that a combination of the resources (helping teachers see *how* to implement ‘what works’) and the accountability of the LEA and Ofsted had forced through changes in practice rather than just in policy. Though resented initially, the new methods did seem to become empowering for teachers, who saw improvement in their teaching practice. Teachers participating in the research also identified the value of continuity of practice across schools in supporting the sharing of best practice across the school system.

Who: Professional Development & Capacity Building

In order to help embed sustainable ownership of the strategy by the profession, the content and resources for the Literacy Hour were accompanied by a substantial investment in devolved support for teachers from 1997 onwards. 'Cascade' training was used to induct every classroom teacher in the content and techniques of the strategy. Regular monitoring dictated the level of ongoing support for schools, delivered through a network of national and local advisors, with funding from central government (who paid half the salary of full-time strategy staff in each Local Education Authority (LEA)).

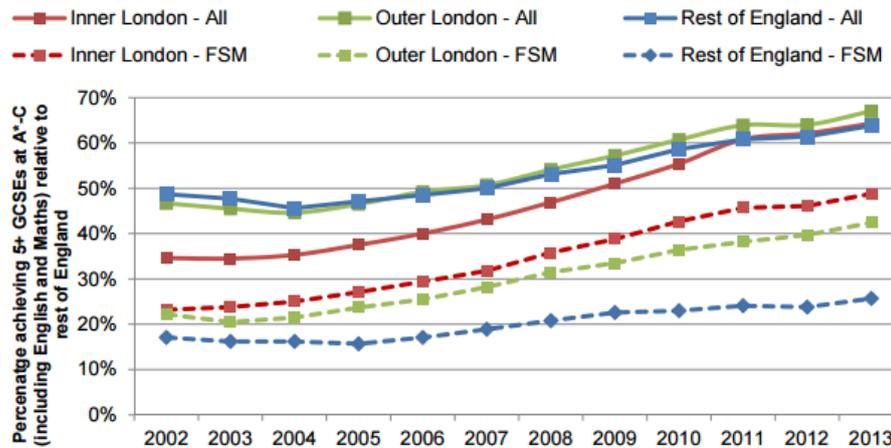
There is some qualitative evidence that the NLS developed capacity in teachers, school leaders and local leaders. At the strategy's midway point in 2000, the OISE/UT described the success of devolved responsibility where "increasingly, the expertise is located at the local level, with consultants... and expert literacy teachers providing the support that teachers need, when they need it."¹⁷ A decade after NLS began, Ofsted highlighted leadership and management as a key strength in the teaching of English nationally, which they attributed partly to "the significant support and training for subject leaders from the National Strategies in recent years."¹⁸

The national infrastructure of NLS was flexible, responding to those schools and areas where literacy results were stagnant or increasing with more or less support accordingly. Support therefore was intensively directed to areas of historical underachievement such as the inner-city. In recent years, the 'London Effect' in schooling has been much discussed: inner-city areas which had the worst educational outcomes in the early '90s are now home to the best state schools in the country. This is not just the case in London but also Birmingham and Manchester. Though studies have posed a variety of explanations including the Academies Programme, Teach First and London Challenge¹⁹, recent research has identified that improvement in attainment pre-dates these policy initiatives, which focused on secondary schools.

"[T]he improvement in Key Stage 2 English scores at age 11 occurred almost exactly at the same time as the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were rolled out, and London local authorities made up many of the pilot areas for these programmes. More research is needed to understand whether these programmes were an important source of London's improvement and, if so, why this was not repeated across the country when the programmes were rolled out nationally."²⁰

Another explored factor in the 'London Effect' is the higher percentage of ethnic diversity in the city, compared to the rest of the country.²¹ However, a recent study by the LSE focusing on disadvantaged pupils used detailed controls to strip out the effect of migration on the growth in performance. Holding all other factors constant, researchers still found a significant increase in performance of pupils in London.²² The authors caveat their findings by pointing out one specific policy is unlikely to explain the phenomena of increased primary attainment for disadvantaged pupils in London, however they point to the Literacy Hour as one of many possible factors. Such a long-term impact for pupils' skills in London's inner-city, suggests a much deeper professional learning in how to effectively teach literacy amongst these communities of teachers.

Figure 1: Proportion of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at A*-C (including English and Maths) over time across areas and groups



Sources: Authors' calculations using National Pupil Database (2002 to 2013). FSM refers to children eligible and claiming free school meals.

Local infrastructure for teacher development, including leadership capacity and the 'middle tier' of local government could be a factor in the geographically uneven success of policy implementation. The LSE study of the NLP²³ found that this earlier trial of Literacy Hour strategies was less successful in more rural areas. The NFER²⁴ and Ofsted evaluations²⁵ of the NLP found regional differences in the implementation of the policy at local and school level. Both reports mentioned school leadership and local support as crucial factors in the schools' ability to effectively implement the strategy, supporting the hypothesis that in areas of the country where the NLS was least effective, this may have been so in part because the infrastructure for implementation was weaker.

In examining geographical inequality of implementation, it is important to be aware of other investments in inner-city education which may have added to a 'London effect'. In the same year that the NLS began, Education Action Zones (EAZs) were announced. Clusters of schools in deprived areas would work with funding from local businesses to innovate and provide local solutions to local problems. These EAZs had a particular focus on reducing exclusion, increasing pupil motivation and providing opportunities for 'gifted and talented' pupils. A year later, larger number of areas benefitted from similar projects under the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative. An early evaluation by a team of researchers from the NFER, LSE and Institute for Fiscal Studies found that stakeholders perceived EiC to be "creating a greater sense of partnership between schools and their LEAs" and also found positive effects of the EiC on attendance, when compared with similar non-EiC schools.²⁶ A later LSE study on low educational achievement found that EiC initiative had helped reduce low attainment.²⁷

The metamorphosis of city schools and the new geographical inequality in attainment which emerged after this period of government, may be partially explained by latent advantage for city schools in collaboration and improvement, which could have been compounded by the raft of inner-city interventions and resources. These latent advantages include the relative ease of sharing expertise and support between closely-situated schools in a city, as well as the "brain drain" of

human capital from less urban areas to England's major cities. With increased investment in capacity building during the late 90s and through the 2000s, the infrastructure for effective staff development in cities could have been key to the development of more effective teaching of literacy .

During this period, a number of policies were introduced to raise the status and quality of teachers being recruited and retained. In 2000, the salaries of newly qualified teachers were increased by 6.6% (double the rate of inflation), to tempt strong graduates into the profession. An upper pay scale was introduced, alongside responsibility points, which would allow headteachers to award extra money for teachers taking on extra roles in the school, incentivising more teachers to stay. A new Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) status attracting a higher salary was also created. This role celebrated the development of teaching expertise (providing a career progression route other than management thereby valuing classroom skills) and created a mechanism to disseminate best practice within and across schools (ASTs, like LA advisers, were expected to improve the practice of teachers in their school and across their local authority).²⁸

How: Accountability

Alongside devolution of responsibility and quality professional development, Michael Barber identified good data, clear targets, ambitious standards and accountability as crucial ingredients in the success of NLS. Government set about developing 'good data' as soon as it came into office: organising Unique Pupil Numbers (UPNs) so that students' progress could be tracked across their education. This would pave the way for value-added data and later contextual value added (CVA), allowing school leadership, LEAs and Ofsted to see the progress that pupils were making in school.

Clear targets and ambitious standards were set the September after the general election. The 1997 white paper required all schools to develop annual plans for improvement (now known as school improvement plans) for September 1998, based on an appraisal of their current pupil outcomes in comparison to local and national averages; most recent inspection evidence; and information on the rate of progress needed to achieve national standards.²⁹ Local Education Authorities would be responsible for guiding schools in developing these plans, and they would prepare their own Education Development Plans (EDP) to be scrutinised by the Secretary of State. These EDPs would set out the services and support the LEA would give schools in order to help them meet their performance targets, based on the schools' own improvement plans.

In their review of the predecessor National Literacy Project, researchers from the NFER had commented that 'it had to be the main priority for the school's development'³⁰ in order to yield high results. Both the NFER review and Ofsted's pointed to a lack of headteacher buy in as a challenge in implementing the NLP. In the accountability structures accompanying New Labour's NLS, the goals of school, LEA and national government were in deliberate alignment. Schools were accountable to their LEAs, who were given powers to intervene by inviting Ofsted to inspect; appointing additional governors to steer school improvement; and taking funding decisions away from the governing body of the school if deemed necessary. These new powers made examination results a high stakes priority for headteachers; if they couldn't evidence improvement, they could lose control of the school finances and, if the governing body felt necessary, even lose their jobs.

Michael Barber perceived this cocktail of accountability to be important in raising standards. In line with this analysis, the independent team evaluating the programme from OISE/UT attributed much of the first year impact of the NLS to “higher motivation” amongst teachers. Academics Earl, Torrance & Watson described this accountability in a positive light, with the strategy “raising awareness and creating a sense of urgency”.³¹ In their model, this created *motivation*, alongside *capability* (from increased professional development) and the right *situation* (the supportive environment created by leaders in the school and locally): three key factors which the academics theorised were crucial for rapid improvement. Ofsted, too, noted that clear targets alongside monitoring and accountability systems embedded across the school were linked to increased outcomes from the policy: “more often than not, the best-performing schools show strengths in assessment”.³² Ofsted noted the strategy had also raised teachers’ expectations of SEN pupils in particular, and supported teachers in setting clearer objectives for these students.³³

However, there was not universal agreement that higher stakes in accountability were a good thing for the development of all pupils’ skills. Contemporary critics of the programme questioned whether the rise in achievement could be explained by increased teaching to the test.³⁴ A study by researchers from the University of Bristol tested this hypothesis, using a dataset from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)³⁵ to compare attainment of its cohort in official government tests with the reading component of a test administered independently in a health centre, as part of the ALSPAC research. The researchers found a small but statistically significant rise in scores according to both school-delivered and independent tests for the two cohorts for which they had data,^c evidence for a real rise in literacy skills over the period.³⁶

There were more worrying (and substantiated) concerns about a different aspect of teaching to the test, however. As the Cambridge Primary Review later observed, schools’ “resources and efforts were [being] targeted at those pupils who were within range of achieving a Level 4 because that is the standard by which the success of schools was judged”³⁷, with less focus on the lowest-attaining groups who were furthest away from this benchmark.

Accountability post-Literacy Strategy

The slowing rate of improvement in literacy from 2000-2003 was seen to be a failure of the standards agenda. The national, local and school-level targets were perceived to have driven a narrowing of the curriculum, a decline in pupil and teacher wellbeing and a reduction of the joy of primary schooling (including reading for pleasure). Consequently the NLS (alongside the National Numeracy Strategy) was incorporated into the Primary National Strategy (PNS) in 2003. This promised a middle path between government prescription and teacher innovation; between standards and creativity – launched in the aptly named paper *Excellence and Enjoyment*.³⁸ Whilst urging teachers to use their freedom to be creative with the timetable and the curriculum, the PNS also maintained focus on tests, targets and tracking but with a strong new emphasis on personalised learning.

High stakes attainment targets had prompted schools to raise the level of the average learner to above the benchmark of a 4. Now they were encouraged to think beyond the cohort percentage and

^c This was between 1998 and 1999 and 1999 and 2000, the first two years of the NLS.

to personalise learning for individuals, improving the progress of those in the tail of underachievement and pushing those high achievers perceived to be overlooked by the 'one-size fits all' nature of the NLS. Teachers were expected to use Assessment for Learning to boost personalised pupil progress in the classroom; meanwhile school leaders were to use government-provided software the Pupil Achievement Tracker (which morphed into RAISEonline in 2005) to monitor the progress of and attainment gaps between different groups including low prior attainers, pupils with SEN, newly designated Gifted and Talented pupils, Black and Minority Ethnic groups and those on Free School Meals.

Just as schools were encouraged to personalise their approach for different learners, similarly school accountability became more flexible and bespoke for individual schools. Simple value added data based on prior attainment were published for primaries in 2003.³⁹ This meant LEAs and Ofsted would not just take into account raw attainment data of schools but also be able to discern between those who made a lot of progress with their pupils (including those with low prior attainment) and those who were adding little value to pupils' skills on entry. In 2005 Contextual Value Added (CVA) was piloted, taking into account other factors on student achievement beyond a school's control including gender (girls continued to outperform boys, which meant all-girls schools appeared much more successful than all-boys schools on a first inspection of raw results); mobility (in some inner-city areas, mobile populations meant schools might lose 50% or more of their cohort during the course of schooling, meaning results were altered by pupils who had not attended the school for very long) and levels of deprivation. Schools were grouped into virtual 'families' based on having cohorts with similar characteristics, meaning that they could compare themselves with the progress of schools in similar circumstances.

The introduction of School Improvement Partners (SIPs) in 2005 meant that one Local Authority funded advisor would get a detailed picture of an individual school's strengths and weaknesses. SIPs worked with the headteacher to develop the school improvement plan and to help the school select appropriate school improvement services. Increasingly, these included services from other schools. Since 1998 'beacon schools' were identified and given funding and accreditation to work with others (often 'twinned' with failing schools), to improve their performance. In 2009 it was announced that traded schools improvement service providers would be diversified beyond the local authority, to include excellent schools.

As well as moves toward more intelligent accountability, there were attempts at the very end of Labour's third term in office to *balance* accountability and end a narrow focus on academic outcomes. There had been a growing appreciation that schools needed an accountability system which took into account their diverse work in supporting, particularly vulnerable children, to achieve excellent outcomes. The Every Child Matters⁴⁰ (ECM) agenda from 2003 onwards grew out of an appreciation that children's achievement at school was inextricably linked with their wellbeing and safety. The Excellence in Cities programme already had a remit to promote inclusion and reduce anti-social behaviour but the ECM agenda built upon this four years later, expecting all schools to work towards ECM outcomes: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic wellbeing. This formally gave schools responsibility for factors that interacted with low performance in reading, particularly of disadvantaged groups, including: pupil mental and emotional health, self-confidence and resilience, pupil attendance and parental

engagement. The 2009 white paper was published alongside a consultation on metrics for pupil wellbeing and laid out plans to develop a School Report Card which would draw together not only the attainment and contextual value added figures for a school but also its success in closing the attainment gap for the most disadvantaged and the wellbeing of pupils, alongside the opinions of pupils and parents of the school.

Parenting Support in and with Schools

The Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) Pathfinder project ran from 2006-08, funding 18 LAs to deliver one of three parenting programmes for parents of 8-11 year olds with behavioural problems. Randomized controlled trials on these programmes showed significant effects on children's reading and writing skills.^{41 42} The PEIP pilot showed a dramatic decrease in behaviour difficulties and prompted a national roll-out between 2008 and 2011.⁴³ The DCSF granted funding to all local authorities in England, projecting that each LA would be able to support 150-200 parents a year. Families were referred through schools and other professionals who identified children's challenging behaviour or parental risk factors, or through self-referral routes. Local Authorities were responsible for working out which parents were priorities in receiving the programme.⁴⁴

Parent Support Advisers (PSAs) were also piloted in schools at a similar time, through funding for 20 Local Authorities between 2006 and 2008 to introduce PSAs into their workforce. For PSA schools compared to matched 'control' non-PSA schools, there was a substantial drop in persistent absenteeism.

PEIP funding was fixed between 2008-2011. After this period LAs were expected to find funding in their own budgets to sustain the programme. Questions over sustainability were raised by providers at this time; with concerns that demand from schools may drop once they were asked to pay for services, in the context of real terms cuts to school budgets, due to inflation.⁴⁵ There were also concerns on the supply side: LAs budgets were faced substantial reductions in funding. This challenge also faced PSAs: schools and LAs had to decide how much of their budget to continue to allocate to this resource. It is difficult to gauge how this devolved spending decision has played out nationally but a recent review into early intervention services found that many Local Authorities were prioritising acute intervention services over preventative services, which indicates programmes like PEIP did not continue to be financed by local government in many areas.⁴⁶

Addressing the Tail of Illiteracy under New Labour

Through the New Labour years, approaches to inclusion of disadvantaged groups and to raising attainment for those falling behind mirrored the approaches to national literacy, but at a lagged pace and with proportionally less success. In the NLS approach to national literacy, changes in pedagogy and professional capacity were driven by a national goal which aligned accountability from national government down to individual schools. However, there were practical challenges in replicating this success in addressing the needs of vulnerable learners.

Time for data to be gathered using new Unique Pupil Numbers was necessary before accountability could become nuanced enough to hold schools to account for pupil progress, and particularly for certain groups prone to underachievement. A transformation, too, in understanding how poverty

intersected with underperformance required time. It was prompted by events on the ground and developed into a policy agenda (with the sad death of Victoria Climbié, which sparked the development of ECM) and then had to percolate back through Whitehall and local government before changing practice in schools. The accountability element of this change in perspective – a School Report with published metrics in wellbeing and data on internal school gaps – was not developed until 2009. The policy was not implemented before New Labour's time in office ended in 2010. Therefore, whilst there was investment in specialist-designed resources for pupils vulnerable to underperformance, and numerous investigations into teaching quality and how to improve it, these elements of a successful strategy were not strengthened by accountability. Arguably, efforts to reach vulnerable underperformers were actually undermined by school, local and national targets, which still focused on the achievement of the majority, allowing the minority's needs to be de-prioritised.

The Teaching of Reading

The plateauing of English results in the early 2000s suggested that the pedagogy of the NLS was not helping the most hard to reach children. Educationists pointed out the whole-class approach led to a lack of identification and intervention for children who were falling behind, contrasting the NLS with other literacy schemes and programmes, such as *Success For All*.⁴⁷ In response to this challenge, an intervention scheme, Early Literacy Support (ELS), was introduced in December 2001. It was aimed at Year 1 pupils who were falling slightly behind their peers, to be delivered by Classroom Support Assistants for a total of 60 sessions, with additional interventions for pupils in Years 4 and 5. The programme was didactic: a structured series of worksheets and 'scripts' were provided for teaching assistants to be able to deliver the intervention. Ofsted highlighted the programme as particularly useful in helping schools deal with underperforming SEN pupils.⁴⁸

After the NLS was incorporated into the Primary Strategy in 2003, a more comprehensive three-wave intervention policy was developed to address the needs of a range of learners in Reading (with particular focus on phonics). The waves of Every Child a Reader (ECaR) included the whole class, including those falling behind and pupils with specific support needs, who undertook a 20-week 'Reading Recovery' programme (RR). Evaluations showed that children in the reading recovery were able to learn four to five times faster than those not receiving the intervention, so that they can catch up across the course of the programme.⁴⁹ The gains from the early intervention could still be seen at age 11, evidence for the importance of early intervention.⁵⁰ Similar to NLS, ECaR also had a cascade model, with lead teachers championing Reading Recovery (RR) in each school and local authority.

Professional Capacity

Despite strong evidence of the potential of RR in supporting pupils vulnerable to underachievement, analysis of its implementation identified challenges. A 2006 study of the literacy intervention in London boroughs found that although RR was successful, it didn't reach all pupils who needed it. More than one in five children in the study was reported not to have received any additional support, despite being identified as low attaining.⁵¹ Interventions outside of Reading Recovery in the study were almost all carried out by Teaching Assistants rather than teachers or staff with specialist training. The report pointed to funding challenges, identifying a lack of appropriately trained teachers amongst the staff as a potential reason for the lack of/poor quality intervention.⁵²

At the same time, teacher training in recognising, assessing and teaching children with special needs was being highlighted as the 'the single most important factor in radically improving SEN provision' and improving the outcomes of underperforming groups towards closing the gap.⁵³ A 2006 Education Select Committee Inquiry into SEN teaching heard that there was a lack of specialist staff trained to support students with specific learning needs. The committee's report referenced National Audit Commission research in which 23 per cent of mainstream teachers said they had only one day's training on SEN per year.⁵⁴ In the same year, a survey of members by teaching union NUT found similarly only 36 per cent felt confident in teaching children specifically facing the language-related Special Educational Need, dyslexia. Three quarters of surveyed teachers wanted additional professional development and trained support in the classroom.⁵⁵

In response, *The Children's Plan* was launched in 2007, with a focus on the progress of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN).⁵⁶ It announced new indicators on the attainment gap between SEN and non-SEN pupils to heighten accountability for this group; and strengthened the role of SEN-coordinators (SENCOs) in schools, requiring them to be trained teachers and introducing a mandatory qualification for all SENCOs to work towards.

In 2008, the Bercow Review into the provision of services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) published its report. It had found inconsistency of access to and quality of SLCN identification and intervention. It reported that "in many areas we visited... frontline professionals did not always feel that sufficient priority was given to addressing the needs of children and young people with SLCN".⁵⁷ Amongst their list of 40 recommendations, Bercow's Review Group called for work to strengthen focus on SLCN within the primary curriculum. The resultant Rose Report recommended increased emphasis on systematic synthetic phonics in initial teacher training, alongside specialist trained teachers so that every primary school teacher would have access to expertise in language-related SEN – a recommendation taken up in the development of the SENCO role.

Despite years of calls for increased training and resources, Ofsted's 2010 report into Special Educational Needs and Disability found that "over the last five years [outcomes for SEN pupils] have changed very little" primarily because of the quality of teaching for pupils falling behind. The introduction of the report made the damning assessment that "as many as half of all pupils identified for School Action [a category of SEN] would not be identified as having special educational needs if schools focused on improving teaching and learning for all, with individual goals for improvement."⁵⁸ Pupils performing below expectations were, the inspectorate said, being unnecessarily labelled SEN when in fact they had just fallen behind as a consequence of "poor whole-class teaching or pastoral support".⁵⁹ An LSE study of low educational achievers three years prior had identified groups particularly vulnerable to this type of underachievement, including Looked After Children (LAC) and white FSM-eligible boys.⁶⁰

For pupils with learning needs which required additional support, Ofsted found that what they received often did not "[meet] their needs effectively, either because it was not appropriate or not of good quality or both."⁶¹ The reason for this was a concern common to the Bercow's Report – that crucial joint agency working was not happening. Seven years previously, the ECM report had

introduced plans for a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) to ease the sharing of information between services and asked all local authorities to create Children's Trusts to bring together the coordination of services for young people and families (including education, health, social services, connexions careers advice and youth offending services), overseen by a local Director of Children's Services. However, as with pedagogical reforms prior to the NLS, policy reforms without strong accountability had led to little change on the ground. Although both Ofsted and the Bercow Report found some examples of best practice in cross-agency working (often in inner city areas) in the majority of instances, coordinated support was poor. Barriers to effective joint working included different approaches to identification and thresholds for intervention across services, commissioning of services without clear service-level agreements across partners, and a lack of robust evaluation and accountability for services. Bercow found that local agreements for Speech and Language Therapy and other SLCN services often didn't mention performance measures. Meanwhile Ofsted commented that "[t]oo often ... agencies focused simply on whether a service was or was not being provided rather than whether it was effective."⁶² Both Ofsted and Bercow emphasised the need for increased accountability.

Accountability

The challenges of implementing interventions, improving SEN teaching and increasing the attainment of pupils falling behind resonate with the challenges facing the predecessor to the NLS, the NLP. Evaluations of the literacy pilot pointed to the need for local leader and headteacher commitment to the project in deploying staff and ensuring training and support mechanisms to drive up teaching quality. In instances where the literacy programme was not a priority for these school and local leaders, reviews found the NLP was much less effective. This helped shape the NLS aim to align goals of national, local and school governance through targets and accountability structures. However, the national, local and school priority of increased outcomes at Level 4 was not necessarily aligned with aims of inclusion and catch up for those working well below Level 4. Over this period, training, resources and rigorous monitoring helped increase Level 4 percentages but potentially also eclipsed the needs of a minority falling far behind.

School accountability meant progress with significantly underperforming groups was more important for some schools than others. For instance, schools in deprived areas with high percentages of FSM, SEN and LAC pupils could not meet national targets without bringing the majority of their cohort up to nationally expected standards (Level 4). Those in wealthier areas did not have as keen accountability when deprived pupils were in a minority. This could be an explanatory factor in the 'London effect' whereby inner-city areas with high concentrations of deprivation became the best schools at making progress with disadvantaged pupils. Nevertheless, even within deprived schools, there was incentive to work with those closer to the Level 4 borderline (and likely to be the least deprived) than those who had fallen furthest behind or who had particularly complex needs. Accordingly, in the first few years of the NLS, the gap between schools in more and less deprived areas (as measured by Free School Meal eligibility) closed during the NLS but these were driven by *non-FSM* pupils in these schools. As a result, the attainment gaps within schools were widening at the same time as school level gaps were to be closing.⁶³ In later years, attainment of FSM eligible pupils steadily increased on average, but so did that of non-FSM meaning that the national narrowing of the gap was slow.

By the end of their third term in office, reading scores under New Labour had broken through the 80% barrier and were steadily climbing upwards again. Five years later than planned, overall English scores hit the NLS' original target.

Table 1.2: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving level 4 in Key Stage 2 English and Reading tests 2002 to 2009

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Reading	80	81	83	84	83	84	87	86
Writing	60		63	63	67	67	68	68
English	75	75	78	79	79	80	81	80

However, after data was able to be tracked and published on the attainment gap between vulnerable underperforming groups, it was apparent that a significant minority were persistently underperforming. By 2010, poorer children were still twice as likely to not have reached a good level by age 11, compared to their wealthier peers. And while non-SEN children were almost universally achieving a 'good' level of literacy, age 11, almost one in two children with any learning needs were likely to be below this level. For children with a statement, less than one in five children reached the age of 11 with a good level of literacy.

Table 1.3: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving level 4 in Key Stage 2 English 1998 to 2010 by Free School Meal eligibility^d

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Non-FSM	83	84	84	83	83
FSM	61	63	65	63	65
Gap	22	21	20	20	18

Table 1.4: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving level 4 in Key Stage 2 English tests 1998 to 2010 by SEN status

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Non-SEN	92	92	93	92	93
School Action	48	52	56	54	55
Gap	44	40	37	38	38
School Action +	30	34	37	35	37
Gap	62	58	56	57	56
Statement	17	19	19	17	17
Gap	75	73	74	75	76

While some areas of the country evidenced best practice for boosting outcomes of vulnerable groups, others did less well with these pupils where they continued not to be a priority in terms of accountability. Similarly, provision of coordinated services for pupils with SLCN remained a 'postcode lottery'.

In Summary

Having explored some criticisms of pupil outcome data, it is true that the NLS may not have achieved gains quite as dramatic as the headline results initially suggested. However, there is a convincing body of research that shows it nonetheless had an impressive impact on both pupil outcomes and teacher capacity, whose results have persisted as pupils go on to secondary school. The successful

^d Data taken from DCSF (2009) *Key Stage 2 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics, in England 2008/09* Department for Children, Schools and Families

elements of the strategy included specialist design of curricula, pedagogy and intervention and significant funding for local infrastructure to devolve expertise and to 'cascade' teacher training. This was crucially supported by accountability which facilitated alignment of national, local and school governance.

We have since seen impressive improvements in teaching capacity and pupils' literacy skills in some of the worst performing areas of the country during New Labour's terms in office. However, despite an overall positive trend, the most impressive improvements were not replicated across the country. It seems that more investment in professional capacity is needed alongside initiatives similar to the EAZs and EiCs in addressing local needs interrelated with geographical underperformance. Meanwhile, a positive trend in literacy skills has not been matched in attitudes, with studies finding that children's enjoyment of reading at age 9 and 11 declined between 1998 and 2003, even as their confidence increased⁶⁴ and that the UK is behind other countries in pupils' enjoyment of reading.⁶⁵

Targets and effective monitoring are appraised by some evaluators of the NLS to have been factors in its success; helping galvanise teachers and leaders and incentivising accurate monitoring for intervention. However, a 'threshold' national target may have encouraged schools to focus on those middle attainers at the expense of those furthest behind and the late evolution of potential 'balanced' accountability measures may have hindered projects to increase attainment of underperformers.

Literacy under The Coalition

A change in relationship between government and public services brought about new opportunities and challenges in eradicating illiteracy. Over this period, reading outcomes continued to rise nationally and for underperforming groups.

Key Strengths and Opportunities	Challenges & Threats
What: The Teaching of Reading	
<p>The Phonics Screening Check and National Curriculum reform placed more emphasis on neglected aspects of pedagogy: phonics and breadth of reading.</p> <p>Independent mechanisms to develop teaching and learning were established, including the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and plans for a future College of Teaching.</p>	<p>Children’s enjoyment of reading continued to decline during this period.</p> <p>Increased academisation reduced the ease of ‘cascade’ in national professional development. Some groups of schools developed best practice in whole-school literacy with disadvantaged groups and disseminated this effectively across their networks. Others were left with little support.</p>
Who: Professional Development and Capacity Building	
<p>Teaching School Alliances and regions overseen by Regional School Commissioners were designed to link schools in areas with impressive educational outcomes, with those that have historically struggled to improve pupil outcomes.</p> <p>Crucial to the ‘school-led system’ was the notion of innovation and experimentation to discover ‘what works’. Some academy chains and free schools appeared to buck the trend of underperformance for poorer pupils.</p>	<p>The ‘middle tier’ between schools and government thinned, with primary schools particularly lacking in support. Regional ‘cold spots’ with little access to school improvement services threatened to hinder progress in areas with low literacy results in the coming years. Meanwhile, there was less regulation, quality assurance or funding of improvement services. In this period, poorer students did worse in some academy chains than in their predecessor schools.</p> <p>Teacher trainee recruitment targets were missed during this period, and increasing numbers of teachers left the profession. Meanwhile, fewer in teaching aspired to headship, posing challenges in ongoing system capacity.</p>
How: Accountability for Reading	
<p>School accountability for groups was heightened through the Pupil Premium. Disadvantaged attainment continued to rise, at an accelerated rate in areas where these children had been in the minority. Outcomes for SEND groups also increased rapidly during this period.</p> <p>The Phonics Screening Check created a new type of test which ensured focus of resources and attention on those falling <i>under</i> the pass-mark, rather than those close to or above it.</p>	<p>Despite increased accountability pressures through rising floor standards, there was not a parallel investment in school support. Curriculum reform and the removal of levels were not accompanied by ‘cascade’ training or increased funding for professional development. Some sector commentators called into question whether all teachers will be able to effectively assess and intervene with under-performing students in the midst of curriculum and exam upheaval.</p>

The School Led System

The policies of the New Labour era have been characterised as those of a ‘directing state’⁶⁶: creating clear ‘delivery chains’ from national government to the recipients of policies in schools. Although this greatly oversimplifies Labour’s approach to public service reform in office, since 2010, government policy in education, as in other areas, can also broadly be seen to have taken a distinct character. Prime Minister David Cameron declared upon election that he did not want civil servants to think “[their] role is to guarantee the outcomes we want to see in our public services – or to directly intervene in organisations to try and improve their performance”.⁶⁷ Instead, a radical change in infrastructure has shifted control away from central government and reforms have proposed to let schools ‘bloom’ like so many diverse ‘flowers’.⁶⁸

A centralised approach under New Labour can be critiqued for making rapid local responsiveness more challenging. With flaws in NLS policy, frontline diagnosis of what needed to change first had to be fed up to central government and then trickled-down the delivery chain again before classroom practice could be altered. Under the Coalition, a vision of a ‘school-led system’ was underpinned by a desire to give schools more autonomy to innovate, according to the needs of their cohorts and local communities.

We have seen this in the approach to system improvement: ‘cascade’ infrastructure of local government under New Labour was replaced by new infrastructures to link more autonomous schools. The new ‘middle tier’ in the school led system included multi-academy trusts (MATs); teaching school alliances (TSAs); and Regional School Commissioners (RSCs), regional arms of the DfE, whose role was created at the end of the parliament to help broker new schools into MATs and TSAs. Whilst the New Labour government sought to share the best available evidence through national strategies, the Coalition government intended to step away from prescription, setting up arms-length organisations to decide on ‘what works’ and stimulating the market to produce resources to a government-set standard. Schools were held to account on the ‘what’ with a reformed national curriculum detailing end of key stage expectations, whilst the ‘how’ of monitoring and assessing progress was devolved to schools in the scrapping of national curriculum levels. However, accountability remained a major policy lever over the period. Under the school-led system, government used data transparency rather than central strategies as its main lever of improving attainment of groups.

During this period, the stagnation in national literacy outcomes ended, with the percentage of pupils leaving school reading well rising to 89 per cent in 2015.

What: Teaching Reading

By 2010, despite the vast improvements in National literacy, just under one in five children still left primary school unable to read well. Ofsted published a report in that year exploring best practice in teaching reading through examples from 12 case study schools. The report stated that successful schools, including those who ‘teach virtually every child to read, regardless of the social and economic circumstances of their neighbourhoods, the ethnicity of their pupils, the language spoken at home and most special educational needs or disabilities’, had some common features of best practice. These included: commitment to a clear purpose of every child learning to read; pace “to make every minute of every lesson count”; strong professional ‘knowledge and understanding of the processes that help children learn to read’; high quality teaching, monitoring and intervention; effective leadership; and consistency of approach.⁶⁹ The latter was specified as the “diligent, concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics” which Ofsted said was central to the success of “all schools that achieve high reading standards”.⁷⁰ Phonics teaching in particular was pointed out as a weakness in those schools that were not able to achieve similar results to the best performing schools. The report recommended that “[in] any school where the teaching of reading... falls below the ‘outstanding’ benchmark... there should be a critical focus on the teaching of phonic knowledge and skills. Shortcomings in the rigour and fitness for purpose of schools’ programmes for phonics teaching should be redressed urgently”.⁷¹

The components of learning to read

The emphasis on phonics in early reading is informed by the Simple View of Reading (SVR).⁷² This model sees reading comprehension as the product of decoding and language comprehension.

Decoding in reading comes down to an understanding of phonics: recognising how combinations of letters (graphemes) correspond to sounds (phonemes), in order to segment words into sounds and blend them together when reading. Studies have shown that teaching *systematic* phonics (whereby phoneme and grapheme-learning is intentionally sequenced according to difficulty) is a more effective way of teaching reading than a word-recognition approach or a non-systematic approach.⁷³ There is evidence that this includes children who struggle to learn to read, e.g. children with dyslexia⁷⁴ or those with an initial propensity to fall behind their peers, for example those eligible for Free School Meals.⁷⁵

The comprehension component of SVR is often taken to mean the ability to recall information, follow narratives and draw inferences, as measured by standardised tests (although the validity of this has been challenged).⁷⁶ Vocabulary is a key aspect of comprehension, especially when it comes to closing the attainment gap between more and less affluent children. We know that the gap in literacy outcomes is already large when children come start school aged 4^e, and some of this gap can be explained by a difference in language exposure pre-school.⁷⁷ However, there has been much less focus in England on systematic vocabulary acquisition as part of the teaching of reading. Some American studies into vocabulary instruction⁷⁸ suggest that comprehension can be improved through ‘robust vocabulary instruction’ (which involves ‘rich’ elaboration and discussion of word meanings, multiple encounters of a word in different contexts and a systematic

^e In 2015, there was a gap in an overall ‘good level of development’ at the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) of 17.7 percentage points between FSM eligible children (51%) and non-FSM children (69%). While 87% and 86%, 79% and 73% of non-FSM pupils achieved a good level of development in understanding language, speaking, reading and writing respectively, for FSM-eligible pupils achieved substantially worse at 76%, 75%, 61% and 56%. Data taken from ‘Additional tables by pupil characteristic’ in DfE (2015) EYFS results 2014 to 2015, Statistical First Release

sequencing of vocabulary exposure, according to the ‘tier’ of the word⁷⁹), alongside indirect methods of vocabulary instruction which are more mainstream in teaching in England.

While the technical skills and vocabulary knowledge are essential, there is growing evidence about the importance of children’s opportunity and motivation to read (not just their technical reading skills) in becoming fluent, confident readers. The amount of time that children spend reading independently is a key contributor to their reading achievement.⁸⁰ OECD data has shown that reading enjoyment is a more important predictor for children’s success in reading than their family’s socio-economic status.⁸¹ Fluent and successful readers enjoy challenging reading, which goes away from simple decoding and word recognition and involves personal interest in what is read.⁸² Underpinning this enjoyment of reading are individual beliefs about self-efficacy – that is, how competent and confident children feel about themselves as readers and as learners. Fostering this love of reading and sense of achievement is crucial. Worryingly, findings from the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) international study suggest that despite their overall skill in reading, children in English primary schools tended to be less keen to read outside school and less confident about their ability to read than children in many other countries.⁸³

The Coalition government set about redressing the issue of shortcomings in phonics programmes. In 2011 they: raised the quality of programmes by publishing a set of criteria for an effective phonics programme; published a list of programmes which met these criteria; and provided initial match-funding of up to £3,000 for schools to purchase these.⁸⁴ This happened in tandem with the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check: a light-touch assessment which identified children who had not learnt phonic decoding to the appropriate standard by the end of Year 1 and required further intervention in Year 2 before re-taking the test.

Criticism of benchmark accountability is that schools are incentivised to prioritise students close to a threshold and are given less incentive to work with pupils far away from this attainment line. However, the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) introduced a double-testing system, with an initial test in Year 1 and a follow-up test in Year 2 for those who didn’t reach expected standard. This design incentivised investment of experienced staff and resources in exactly those pupils who are falling behind, with a significant amount of time given to evidence progress for this group. There is some evidence that the PSC may be increasing the quality of phonics teaching; since its implementation in 2012, there has been a rise in phonics outcomes according to the check.⁸⁵ However data broken down by marks in the test shows a spike at the pass borderline, suggesting that this may not be a true picture of phonics capability and that there are incentives to game the test.⁸⁶ Although there has been a continued rise in attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2, an independent evaluation of the PSC which isolated the effects of this policy intervention found no evidence that the first two years of the check had impacted literacy levels at Key Stage 1 (KS1).⁸⁷ Teachers who participated in the evaluation were positive about the value of phonics teaching, but the majority were not positive about the value of the check.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, researchers found evidence that its introduction had influenced training taken on by the school.⁸⁹ Whether initial antipathy from the profession to the prescriptiveness of the PSC will continue, or whether a commitment to synthetic phonics ‘first and fast’ will begin to be ‘owned by the profession’, as was seen with the NLS, will only be known in time.

There is little data on why improvements in phonics teaching have not been translated into children's ability to read aged 7. A recent Ofsted case study of poor practice in the teaching of reading identified weaknesses in whole-school literacy plans.⁹⁰ Ofsted examined a sample of 12 primary schools in Stoke-on-Trent, which is in the bottom quintile of local authorities in England according to the percentage of children achieving expected standards in reading at Key Stage 1. Their report found similar elements of poor practice amongst underperforming schools in the sample, including:

- Low expectations of progression rates for pupils amongst the school leadership;
- An over-reliance of teacher data instead of standardised testing in order to effectively monitor pupil progress and intervene where necessary;
- Insufficient monitoring and improvement of teachers' teaching of reading;
- Whole-school literacy strategies which lacked clarity and were not enforced consistently or systematically across the school;
- Poor quality of teaching reading comprehension through guided reading in KS2;
- Poor quality of planning of home reading in KS1 and KS2;
- Poor understanding of the role of phonics in developing reading and writing skills in KS1.⁹¹

These case studies point to three key elements of professional development which need addressing in underperforming schools: expertise in the teaching of reading across the Key Stages, including *and beyond* phonics; middle leadership capacity in setting and implementing a literacy strategy *across a school*, including developing whole-staff skills in teaching reading; and leadership capacity to use data to target interventions, develop teaching and learning and raise expectations towards a vision of universal literacy. In short, it indicates a need for continued professional development in classroom teaching of reading, middle leadership of whole school literacy and in effective school leadership.

In improving classroom teaching of reading, a common strength of the NLS resources and the Coalition's high quality phonics programmes was that teachers were able to learn from expert-designed content, based on the best available evidence of what worked. However, in some key areas of teaching reading this evidence was still weak, too sparse or had insufficient mechanisms for dissemination to teachers. In systematic phonics teaching^f, for instance, almost all studies of its efficacy had been carried out in America.^g⁹² There was too little research into what worked in increasing children's vocabulary for reading comprehension or increasing the amount and regularity of children's reading for pleasure.

In dissemination of best practice to teachers, there was an increasing inequality of access to resources over the parliament, linked to the character of government. The Coalition shifted away from centrally distributed resources and uniformity in school curricula, as with the NLS, towards a market in resources to complement a market of school choice. In increasing the quality of phonics programmes, government stimulated a market of trade-marked programmes for schools to choose from. This was quality assured through mechanisms such as the government's phonics programme

^f For a definition, see the box on page XX

^g This is a further complication as American English has a slightly more regular orthography (i.e. its spelling rules mean that there is slightly more consistency in the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes).

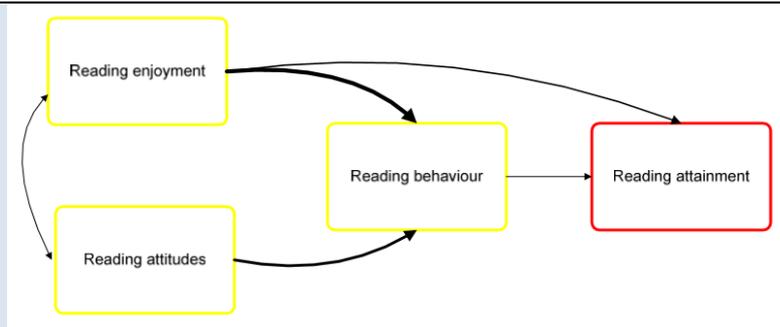
criteria. Whilst the argument may be convincingly made that this gave more choice to schools at the same time as encouraging innovation and improvement for programmes with the 'market edge', a less desirable consequence was the cost for schools. Whereas teacher training and local capacity building under the National Literacy Strategies was subsidised by central government (who paid for experts to develop resources and subsidised the wages of LA advisers), schools had to purchase training and resources to meet the government's phonics requirements through their own budgets (ongoing training costs were not met by the government's one-off match funding for the purchase of these programmes). This was not only more likely to take up more money overall from the education budget in a time of fiscal austerity, it also created an inequality of access for schools with smaller budgets. Unlike the NLS, where more resources and funding for local advisers were directed to areas of underperformance, this new mechanism of dissemination of 'what works' saw better-funded schools and areas able to afford more external support and advice, while their less well-funded counterparts were vulnerable to a Matthew Effect - the idea that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer - which would see them systemically underperform. This is compounded by other similar mechanisms in the system which advantage higher performing schools and place a financial penalty on underperforming schools, discussed in more detail below.

Reading for Pleasure

Children who regularly read for *pleasure* are likely to also have better reading skills, even accounting for differences in family background, although the direction of causation is not clear (Mullis et al 2012, OECD 2011, Twist et al 2007). Nevertheless, better reading skills and reading amount are thought to be reciprocally related to each other – as reading amount increases, reading achievement increases, which in turn increases reading amount (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). The so-called "Matthew effect" (Stanovich, 1986) – referring to the circular relationship between practice and achievement – seems only to be predicted by *intrinsic* and not extrinsic motivation, the former associated with reading for pleasure (Wang and Guthrie, 2004).

Regular reading for pleasure is positively associated with several literacy-related benefits including: reading attainment and writing ability (OECD, 2000); text comprehension and grammar (Cox and Guthrie, 2001); breadth of vocabulary (Angelos and McGriff, 2002), even after other relevant abilities such as IQ or text-decoding skills are controlled for (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). Additionally there are other benefits, including higher attainment in subjects beyond reading; better understanding of other cultures (Meek, 1991) and wider benefits for children's wellbeing and social skills (BOP Consulting 2015). Given these associations, it is worth pointing out that a number of studies have shown that boys enjoy reading less (Clark and Foster, 2005), while children from lower socio-economic backgrounds read less for enjoyment than children from more privileged social classes (e.g. Clark and Akerman, 2006).

The research to date does not clearly establish whether pleasure in reading causes achievement in reading or vice versa. Nevertheless, Clark and De Soyza (2011) mapped the inter-relationships of reading enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour and attainment using survey and attainment data from 4,500 9-11 year olds. Using structural equation modelling, different models were tested out until the 'best fit' model was found. In doing so, the authors concluded that "*reading enjoyment is a doubly powerful source of influence, being related to attainment both directly and indirectly through its relationship with reading behaviour, which, in turn, is related to reading attainment*" (Clark and De Soyza, 2011; 5).



There is evidence from other aspects of learning that initial negative attitudes may be overcome by increasing someone’s ability – thus helping them enjoy the process more. In investigating attitudes to mathematics, Ma & Xu analysed a longitudinal US sample and found that “prior attitude...did not meaningfully predict later achievement” (2004; p. 273). If a similar dynamic exists in reading, then attempts to improve attitudes to reading which do not also improve ability to read may be fruitless.

Nevertheless, much of the research points to the need for intrinsic motivation and for increases in reading attainment not to come at the expense of enjoyment in reading. This is particularly the case in the literature on parental support for reading. For example, Sonnenschein et al., (2000) found that children brought up in a home that viewed reading as a source of entertainment had greater reading-related competencies than children raised in homes that placed greater emphasis on the skills-related aspects of reading. This has interesting implications for how schools interact with parents and encourage reading in the home – suggesting that encouraging family enjoyment of books is preferable to teaching parents to mimic skills-based reading lessons.

Flouri and Buchanan (2004) found that parental involvement in their child’s literacy practices is a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education. However, a YouGov poll (2005) showed that only 40% of parents of 0-12 year olds read to their child daily.

Who: Professional Development & Capacity Building

A key part of the National Literacy Strategy’s design was Michael Barber’s premise that central control should be inversely related to school quality, with “earned autonomy” for strong schools. This thesis of moving from ‘good to great’ became the prevalent paradigm in education policy, through publications such as the influential 2010 McKinsey report into international education systems.⁹³ This paradigm dictated that increased professionalism could end ‘state-prescribed adequacy’ and ‘unleash greatness’ in the education sector.⁹⁴ It is within this paradigm that the Coalition concept of the school-led self-improving system was developed as an approach to system improvement. Building on existing reforms in school autonomy and school-to-school improvement, the school-led system posited that school quality would be driven up by ‘strong’ schools ‘leading the weak’ and spreading best practice amongst their professional peers.

Freedom to innovate has included the rapid expansion of academies (although mostly in secondary rather than primary, to date)^h and the creation of free schools - both of which are free from Local

^h Note: the definition of academies has shifted. Initially a New Labour policy targeted at low income areas in contexts of persistent underperformance, academies had a private Sponsor and increased funding. From 2010

Authority control and the National Curriculum. For those schools still in local authority control, the government sought to increase autonomy by holding schools to account over *what* was taught with a reformed National Curriculum (which detailed ambitious new end of Key Stage expectations). However, removing National Curriculum levels intended to “give schools genuine opportunities to take ownership of the curriculum”⁹⁵; providing freedom over *how* to teach. Such freedoms have led to some interesting case studies of innovations, including schools that have bucked the trend of a stubborn attainment gap and achieved impressive results with especially deprived cohorts. However, the geographical spread of this innovation has been uneven. Most free schools have been established in cities which already out-perform the rest of the country; in areas with a recent history of low achievement, recent reports by the Education Select Committee and others have shown fewer free schools are reaching Good and Outstanding, in preparation to become system leaders.⁹⁶ Regional ‘cold spots’ developed, in which there were few excellent schools to provide services or leadership to those who were failing.⁹⁷

Whilst increased autonomy may have ‘unleashed greatness’ in some already ‘good’ schools, many schools in the system were still struggling or failing in 2010 (often in areas of greater poverty⁹⁸), when reforms began to create a school led, self-improving system. These reforms left a much thinner ‘middle tier’ of accountability and support to guide development of those not yet good schools. Policy changes and new freedoms demanded more of practitioners; expecting greater subject specialism in teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar and requiring schools to re-plan curricula and design assessment processes for every key stage. However, raised expectations were not matched by universal increased training and support to build capacity. Local Authority power and funding dwindled over this period, replaced by a new network of Multi Academy Trusts and Teaching School Alliances in the ‘middle tier’. Whilst the widening of support service providers (which began under New Labour) created scope for innovation and new hubs of expertise (most notably Ark and Harris academy chains, who make excellent progress with their most deprived pupils⁹⁹), the new market of varied providers has sprung up without sufficient mechanisms to:

- fund improvement services in proportion to school need;
- ensure universal coverage of services;
- regulate the quality of improvement services;
- and share best practice across the sector towards system improvement.

These are challenges liable to disproportionately affect failing schools, where significant numbers of children fail to meet national literacy standards, and primary schools, as explored below.

Funding according to need

LEA school improvement services in the early years of New Labour were expected to be delivered according to the relative need of local schools. As LEA funding for education services was top-sliced equally from the funding streams for local schools, the financial burden of supporting the weakest schools in the area was effectively subsidised by the stronger schools, who could expect to get less intervention from the LEA. However, since the introduction of the New Labour academies programme in 2002, academy schools did not have their funding top-sliced and instead received a

a range of schools (including private and grammar) have been allowed to apply for academy status without the need of a Sponsor, providing they are judged Good or better, or have rapidly improving grades. The Education and Adoption Bill legislated for schools deemed to be ‘coasting’ by the Secretary of State to be forced to convert to academy status.

grant to purchase school improvement services directly, from a host of providers including local authorities. By 2010 there were 203 Academies, which affected Local Authority funding to varying degrees, according to the local concentration of these academies. However, as New Labour's academies were targeted at schools with historical educational under attainment in areas of deprivation, this increased per academy funding coincided with need. Under the Coalition government, academy legislation changed. From 2010, Good or Outstanding schools could apply to become academies and be released from local authority control and budgetary top-slicing. Between 2010 and 2015, 4,519 more schools became academies, affecting funding to every Local Authority in the country. This gradually altered funding for support services so that by the end of the parliament, funding was primarily allocated on the basis of pupil numbers (through the Education Services Grant) rather than according to the school's need for services.

When schools commission their own school improvement services they need to balance their value against other potential expenditure, such as support staff or resources. This can disincentivise schools with less moneyⁱ to buy these services in the first place, and handicap those who do in implementing the services more effectively. (For example, if a school receives training from another school on reading recovery, because of the cost of this training they may have less to allocate to dedicated teaching time to deliver small group or one-to-one intervention.) This problem in covering the cost of services is worst for smaller schools, and therefore affects primary schools much more than secondary: the independent evaluation of Teaching Support Alliances (TSAs) noted that deployment of Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) was particularly difficult in the primary sector "where there are fewer resources available to buy in expertise".¹⁰⁰

Universal coverage of services

The national funding formula has long allocated more money to secondary-age pupils than primary-age; meaning that primary schools' services from the local authority are subsidised by secondary school money. However, academisation was much more extensive in the secondary sector than the primary sector, meaning that reduced LA budgets and support affected primaries more than secondary schools during this period. Meanwhile, secondary schools were much more likely to be in MATs as alternative networks to disseminate best practice, compared to primary schools. Aside from school improvement services, with significant cuts to local council funding, local authorities were in a much weaker position to cascade knowledge and best practice in how to cope with the reforms taking place over the parliament.¹⁰¹ For example, an investigation into local authority support for assessment post-levels found only a quarter of LAs were offering suggested assessment frameworks to replace National Curriculum levels.¹⁰²

ⁱ The underlying funding formula has been based on local historical rates of per pupil funding, set by local councils prior to the centralising of education funding. This means some schools (normally in inner-city areas) have more money, by virtue of their geography. However, other factors can play into schools' relative wealth, including their Ofsted rating. Schools which are in Special Measures or Requires Improvement are likely to be unpopular with parents and so to be under-roll, or to lose pupils if they suffer a downgrading. As funding is allocated per pupil, this can mean their funding decreases. Meanwhile, schools who are Good and Outstanding are able to access other revenue streams, for example bidding for grants to develop certain aspects of the curriculum and model best practice to other schools, or directly selling school services to other schools. In this way, there is scope for a widening financial gap between schools which are underperforming and those which are already getting good outcomes with their pupils.

The large scale qualitative reviews of practice in the '70s and '80s seemed to evidence that, without guidance, policy innovations weren't necessarily translated into classroom practice.¹⁰³ Similarly, anecdotal evidence gathered to date suggests that the majority of primary schools have continued to use similar versions of their previous assessment systems, despite national curriculum levels having been officially scrapped from 2014.¹⁰⁴ However, primary schools which have continued to use old assessment frameworks will not have adequately prepared pupils for the new content. It could also be a significant barrier to effective teaching of literacy; where there are poorly constructed assessment procedures, teachers will struggle to accurately assess and intervene for those falling behind.¹⁰⁵ The long term impact on literacy results could be damaging. In summer 2016, KS2 students took the new SATs for the new National Curriculum with 53% of 11 year olds making the grade in the 3Rs which includes reading. Last year, 80% of 11 year olds met the required standard (DfE, 2016).

Regulation of Quality

Under the school-led system, school improvement services were increasingly provided by schools, through the new infrastructures of Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and MATs, and the oversight of Regional School Commissioners.

In 2010 government announced an ambition for 500 TSAs to be designated by 2015. Good or Outstanding schools would be able to apply for this status in order to sell both professional development and school improvement services to others. The first evaluation of this initiative contained evidence of some strong best practice, including school improvement services in some of the case studies which were felt to be more personalised than 'off the shelf' Local Authority support by those involved.¹⁰⁶ However, the independent evaluation, focusing on twelve case study alliances, found large variations in how membership of a TSA was perceived and how TSAs fulfilled their teaching school priorities. While some schools received "focussed bespoke support targeting teaching, learning and leadership development" from their Teaching School, others were just purchasing one-off services, despite the fact that this was known not to be the most effective form of school improvement.¹⁰⁷ Whereas Local Authorities had previously been required to plan their services to suit local need and been held to account through the EDPs they shared with the Department for Education, TSAs had no regulation of the services they offered or accountability for the schools they delivered them to. In Ofsted's annual report of 2015, 'cold spots' of low TSA coverage highlighted the regional inequality in access to services.¹⁰⁸

MATs are an alternative mechanism of school improvement services. They, too, had little regulation and accountability of the services on offer to their schools over this period – covered in some detail below. Ofsted's Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw raised concern over this to the Secretary of State in an open letter in 2016.¹⁰⁹ He described that over the period of the Coalition government "despite having operated for a number of years, many of the trusts manifested the same weaknesses as the worst performing local authorities and offered the same excuses."¹¹⁰

Sharing of best practice toward system improvement

Some MATs showed themselves to be effective in rapidly improving previously failing schools in this period, and in breaking the impasse of the attainment gap. The Sutton Trust conducted research into the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in MATs and identified some "impressive outcomes for their

disadvantaged students against a range of measures, demonstrating the transformational impact on life chances that can be made”.¹¹¹ In some instances, this seemed to be through economies of scale which allowed specialist roles for research and cascaded best practice throughout the network (in a smaller version of the success of the National Literacy Strategy). In one of the most successful MATs a Research Director was employed to oversee the development of curricula to boost accelerated progress. The pilot of the curriculum evidenced improved results, particularly for pupils who begin secondary school without a good level of literacy, before the teaching resources were offered to schools throughout the chain, alongside training in how to delivery them.¹¹² However, sector academics highlighted that the fracturing of the system into different MATs would frustrate the sharing of knowledge across the system.¹¹³ Whilst outliers were found to be making exceptional gains with vulnerable pupils, the Sutton Trust report noted that “a larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving and may be harming the prospects of their disadvantaged students.”¹¹⁴ Variation between chain and school quality was not mitigated by a support system above them, to quality assure their middle tier services or to publish and share guidelines for best practice.

In the early Labour years, LEAs were subject to Ofsted inspections in terms of the quality of their school improvement services. However, the new market of services (including those provided by Local Authorities) was not quality assured by the inspectorate during the Coalition’s time in government. There were numerous calls from academics and the inspectorate themselves for strengthened powers to inspect MATs and their school improvement services. Ofsted’s powers were extended in 2015 to permit ‘focused inspections’ on groups of academy schools controlled by the same MAT. Despite findings from these inspections suggesting systemic weaknesses in some trusts,¹¹⁵ by the end of the parliament, Ofsted was still not permitted to conduct inspections on central MAT organisations, to inspect the delivery of improvement services or to award a standards judgement to the MAT as a whole.¹¹⁶

Ongoing capacity

A final challenge in the shift from local authority school improvement services to TSAs was capacity. While local authorities as providers of services were equipped with full-time staff funded to carry out this work, the independent evaluation found that TSAs required “a vast amount of uncoded leadership time” for the Teaching School.¹¹⁷ Authors of the evaluation raised serious concerns about the sustainability of the programme, compounded by the challenges facing Teaching Schools to maintain their own Ofsted gradings, in the face of curricula upheaval, smaller budgets and changes to national accountability. From the 2015 Autumn statement onwards, the Education Services Grant was cut to a quarter of its original size, restricting further the funding schools had to purchase services.

In recognition of the lack of a ‘middle tier’ between national government and schools, eight Regional School Commissioners (RSCs) were created as regional DfE officials in September 2014. Their large ‘regions’ cut through areas with impressive educational outcomes, linking them with towns and more rural areas that have struggled to improve outcomes at the same rate (so that the East of England is in the same region as North-East London, for instance). This was designed to help share best practice across the geographical divide in school quality. Under the Coalition, the key role of RSCs was defined as addressing underperformance through finding academy sponsors for schools.¹¹⁸

However, a 2015 report by the NFER into the RSC's roles and regions highlighted that "[t]he regions which have the greatest need for high quality sponsors to take on underperforming schools tend to be those with the smaller pool of existing sponsors operating in the region, with high potential for taking on additional schools".¹¹⁹ This pointed to a lack of capacity in the school-led system to provide adequate school improvement. A further complication in the RSC tool of school improvement was that academisation had not been proven to be an effective mechanism of school-improvement, particularly for primary schools – a fact pointed out by the Education Select Committee at the time.¹²⁰ This was also referred to in the NFER report, which recorded that within two of the eight RSC regions, there were over 300 schools which were below national floor standards or soon would be under imminent legislation¹²¹ yet "many of these schools [were] already academies".¹²²

Capacity was not only a problem in terms of school-led system improvement. There were also rising concerns across the parliament of capacity in frontline teaching staff, exacerbated by a baby boom and record numbers of teachers leaving the profession.¹²³ Ofsted's 2015 Annual Report found that location, performance and intake negatively affected schools' ability to recruit, exacerbating gaps between successful schools and those most in need.¹²⁴ A survey carried out by the inspectorate found that 50% of headteachers in areas not considered to be outstanding said they were "not able to recruit enough good staff" and in more challenging areas of underperformance, this rose to 77%.¹²⁵ This recruitment challenge was exacerbated by reform to teacher training. The Coalition rapidly expanded School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) over the parliament and by 2015, fewer than half of trainee teachers were still taking a university-led training route.¹²⁶ However, school-led ITT was only possible if the training school was Good or Outstanding, meaning the best schools were privileged in recruiting new entrants to the profession. This further exacerbated geographical differences in school performance, handicapping struggling schools particularly in coastal or rural communities.¹²⁷ Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, summarised the situation as a "two-tier school-led training system, with one group of lucky schools more able to recruit and one unlucky group less able to do so, further intensifying the disparity in local and regional performance."¹²⁸ The changes also complicated government's control of national teacher recruitment; a 2016 report into teacher training revealed the Department for Education had failed to meet their recruitment targets in four out of the five years of the parliament.¹²⁹

Sector capacity in leadership recruitment was a looming challenge during the parliament too. The link between school leadership and the progress of all learners - including low prior attainers – has been well established (and shown to be even greater in primary schools than secondary schools).¹³⁰ Yet by 2014, 21 per cent of primary headteachers were approaching retirement age with a shortage of deputy heads as candidates to replace them.¹³¹ Increasingly primary headship vacancies were reported as unfilled during the parliament.¹³² Small surveys and case study evidence also suggested an increase in headteachers being fired over drops in school data. One example of this is a survey of governing bodies, carried out by academy auditors UHY Hacker Young. The survey found that changes in the inspection regime had prompted governing bodies to remove headteachers.¹³³ Investigative journalism carried out by the BBC's File on Four uncovered a spate of headteacher 'disappearances' in Kent, following bad Ofsted reports.¹³⁴ Instances such as these contributed to a series of negative headlines about headship during the parliament, comparing the job to football management in terms of its high stakes and likelihood of job loss.¹³⁵ This, alongside the lack of a middle tier support in school improvement, was attributed by many to the low aspiration to

headship amongst primary teachers.¹³⁶ A study by the NCTL found a decline in aspiration for headship and double the proportion of respondents citing *too much responsibility/workload* as their reason for finding headship unattractive.¹³⁷

How: Accountability

The Coalition sought to raise the bar of basic expectations across their period of governance, using data accountability. The definition of a ‘good’ level was raised. Level 4 was the national benchmark in measuring whether children were proficient at reading, writing and maths aged 11. However, analysis of pupil trajectories showed that Level 4 at KS2 was not necessarily a strong predictor of literacy levels towards the end of compulsory schooling, at age 16. In SATs (standardised assessment tests at the end of primary school), National Curriculum Level 4 was broken into ‘sub-levels’ according to the point score on the exam, 4a (the top third of attainment at this level), 4b (middle third) and 4c (bottom third). When prior attainment was analysed by sub-level, the DfE found that achieving a level 4b+ was a strong predictor of later attainment at GCSE; an indication that this higher skill level was a necessary foundation for success at secondary school.¹³⁸ In recognition of this, accountability for primary schools was changed to the higher level, termed ‘secondary school ready’. Since 2013 the government published school data at 4b as well as Level 4, in preparation for the new formal metric of pupil and school performance when new SATs were introduced in the summer of 2016.

However, the change could lead to only a cosmetic improvement in pupils’ literacy skills. Researchers have shown how different performance measures create incentives.¹³⁹ With high stakes for schools on getting students over a Level 4 threshold, it is possible that 4c was a poor predictor for later attainment because attainment in this bracket was the product of short-term strategies to produce exam results rather than the longer-term investment in interventions which are needed to increase children’s poorly developed literacy skills. In this case, shifting the boundary of ‘good’ attainment could be expected to have a similar effect, with those at the new threshold ‘tipped’ over rather than attaining a grade reflective of secure skills built up over time. The rapid increase of attainment by Level 4b measurements supports this theory. Since the announcement of the new future ‘good’ boundary, the data showed a jump in 4b measurements for cohorts in their final year of schooling, even while the percentage of Level 4 attainment stayed still.

Table 1.5: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving a good level in Key Stage 2 Reading, Writing and English tests 2010 to 2015¹⁴⁰ (from 2016 onwards government will change the good level to a Level 4B equiv. shown here in brackets)

	2010	2011	2012*	2013	2014	2015
Reading	83	84	87	86 (75)	89 (78)	89 (80)
Writing	75	75	81*	83	85	87
Grammar, Punctuation & Spelling	-	-	-	74 (65)	76 (68)	80 (73)
English	81	81	85*	87	88	89

* From 2012 the Writing component of English exams was based on teacher assessment, meaning that results before and after 2012 are not comparable

The publishing of 4b alongside Level 4 attainment was part of a broader pattern of accountability through increased data transparency. This strategy was a crucial Coalition lever in improving the

attainment of groups vulnerable to underperformance. Low prior attainment was the most significant predictor of later attainment and so data reform sought to hold schools accountable for the progress of high-, mid- and low- prior attaining groups, publishing this information on a new Ofsted Data Dashboard to make schools directly accountable to parents and prospective parents. The data dashboard also published schools' success in 'Closing the Gap' in different subjects between 'disadvantaged' and non-disadvantaged groups.

Towards the end of New Labour's time in office, the LSE conducted a study of low educational achievers and found that Looked After Children (LAC), SEN and white FSM-eligible boys were particularly vulnerable to underachievement.¹⁴¹ The report commented that poor literacy results in primary were still "a strong risk factor for later low achievement"¹⁴² for these groups. These groups were shown to benefit more than others from increased resources, with higher levels of attainment in instances where they were better funded. The authors argued that dedicated funding for disadvantaged groups ought to reach schools directly rather than being circumvented by Local Authorities if the attainment gap were to be closed.¹⁴³

The Coalition sought to address this upon election through the Pupil Premium (PP). A new, expanded definition of 'disadvantage' was created to include LAC and the children of servicemen and women alongside FSM-eligibility and to extend this to children who had ever been designated FSM or LAC in the past six years (known as Ever-6 FSM). The Pupil Premium was created to award a yearly funding premium, according to the number of Disadvantaged pupils in a school (paid at a higher rate of £1,320 per pupil in primary, compared to £395 per pupil in secondary). This was coupled with accountability, with the data dashboard publishing attainment gaps and Ofsted scrutinising how money was spent to close these gaps.

This accountability measure mirrored the success of the NLS in aligning national and school targets to motivate leadership towards a change in practice. Although no national target was articulated to close the gap between more and less deprived children, the introduction of the pupil premium articulated government intention to close this gap and the scrutiny of data by Ofsted – as with the scrutiny of practice by the inspectorate and the LEA in implementing the literacy hour – helped incentivise concentration of resources towards this problem.

Since the introduction of PP, the gaps narrowed much more dramatically in some local authorities with previously wide gaps and with low concentrations of FSM and disadvantaged pupils.¹⁴⁴ With floor targets which focused on a certain percentage achieving above a benchmark, schools with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds had to develop their expertise in meeting their needs, as in inner-city London. However, where these pupils were the minority there was less incentive and they often underperformed. When PP accountability was introduced, these incentives changed and the priorities of these schools were aligned with the national priority of closing the attainment gap. This pattern of success in aligning national and school goals points towards including attainment gaps in school's headline accountability measures and national floor targets. This could be a much stronger mechanism of accountability than the percentage achieving above a benchmark. Recent research carried out in 2016 by the Social Market Foundation's Commission into educational inequalities found that attainment gaps within schools were more substantial than those between areas, echoing similar findings from IPPR analysis in 2013.^{145 146}

Table 1.6: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving Level 4 in Key Stage 2 Reading by Free School Meal eligibility & Disadvantage (with Level 4b attainment in parentheses)

	2010	2011	2012*	2013	2014	2015
Non-FSM	84	85	89	88 (76)	91 (81)	91 (83)
FSM	65	67	77	75 (59)	79 (64)	80 (67)
Gap	19	18	12	13 (17)	12 (17)	11 (16)
Non-Disadvantaged	-	-	90	89 (78)	92 (83)	92 (85)
Disadvantaged	-	-	79	78 (62)	82 (68)	83 (71)
Gap	-	-	11	11 (16)	10 (15)	9 (14)

* From 2012 the Writing component of English exams was based on teacher assessment, meaning that results before and after 2012 are not comparable

National improvements in outcomes for FSM-eligible and disadvantaged groups were similar to those for non-disadvantaged pupils over the period, meaning that the gaps by both definitions have remained relatively stable. It is interesting to observe that attainment has risen more steeply and the gap has closed more consistently for the Disadvantaged group than for FSM-eligible pupils between 2012 and 2015. This may be an indication of the effect of accountability in encouraging schools to shift focus and dedicate resources. Often this privileges the ‘lowest hanging fruit’, children closest to the pass mark, with educational challenges which are the easiest to overcome.

Defining Children’s Vulnerability

Over the Coalition’s period in government, the discourse on children from low income homes shifted. Under New Labour the Every Child Matters agenda had encouraged schools to take responsibility for students’ ability to stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing. This was part of a broader definition of a school’s role, as well as a complex definition of vulnerability, understanding these things to be interrelated with poverty, social exclusion and educational under-attainment. In 2009, the proposed School Report intended to broaden accountability for schools, helping them commit to resources to support children across a range of outcomes, rather than just their attainment.

Under the Coalition government, the discourse of Every Child Matters was abandoned. Educationalists have argued that the rhetorical shift, alongside budget cuts and a maintained high stakes focus on academic outcomes, has encouraged schools to take a short-termist approach on ‘what works’ in changing pupils’ data outcomes, but less likely to work with other services to intervene early and address the root causes of school under-performance.¹⁴⁷

The most significant accountability change under the Coalition was the announcement of a shift in floor standards and league tables from attainment measures to measures of progress and attainment. Floor standards (introduced in 2000) had been incrementally raised over the New Labour years and the Coalition continued this pattern, increasing primary floor standards from 55% achieving good or better results (combined English and maths target) to 60% in 2010 and 65% in 2013/4, setting an aspiration to raise this further to 85%. The 2010 White Paper also attached a progress requirement to the floor standards for the first time, recognising that some schools were making excellent progress with low prior attainers, whilst others were able to rely on high prior-attainers to achieve high overall results. Schools would fall below the floor if fewer than the median percentage of pupils were making expected progress in reading, writing and maths between KS1 and

KS2 (in 2013, the national median was 91% achieving expected progress) *and* they were falling below the attainment floor standard. Meanwhile, stakes were heightened for schools failing the floor targets. Falling beneath the floor standard triggers an Ofsted inspection. In line with Coalition emphases on prescribing *what* school outcomes ought to be but *not* how to achieve them, Ofsted focused much more over this period on outcomes. Following the 2010 Academies Act allowed the Secretary of State to force schools to convert to academy status through ‘academy orders’ if Ofsted placed the school in Special Measures category. This normally would mean a new governing body, headteacher and the replacement of many key staff. In 2010 there were 962 primary schools falling below the floor standards.¹⁴⁸ By 2015, only 676 fell below the new, higher floor standard.¹⁴⁹

As higher proportions of the population achieved a ‘good’ level of reading over the parliament, analysis of the data suggested it was children vulnerable to underperformance who were boosting these overall statistics. In the final term of New Labour, SEN attainment for children categorised as School Action increased, but for students in the brackets of more significant need – School Action + and Statemented – attainment stagnated at the end of the parliament, as did the gap between these children and those with no special educational needs. During the Coalition’s period in office, achievement for children categorised as School Action improved at a much faster rate, rising to 74% of all children in this category by 2014. The gap narrowed from 38 percentage points in 2010 to 22 percentage points by 2014. The stagnation in outcomes for children with more serious special educational needs was broken, as attainment rose for these groups, at a faster rate than the national average.

Table 1.7: Percentage of 11 years olds achieving level 4b and above in Key Stage 2 Reading by SEN status

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Non-SEN	93	93	95	94	96	95
School Action	55	57	65	68	74	-
Gap	38	36	30	26	22	-
School Action +	37	41	49	55	62	-
SEN support*	-	-	-	-	-	69
Gap	56	52	46	39	34	26
Statement	17	20	22	27	29	30
Gap	76	73	73	67	67	65

* From 2015 the categories School Action and School Action + were replaced by SEN Support

The 2014 Children and Families Act marked a significant change in SEND reform. Following Ofsted’s damning report of the over-identification of SEND (discussed in the New Labour section of this chapter),¹⁵⁰ government emphasised that more children should be prevented from falling behind through ‘quality-first teaching’.¹⁵¹ School Action and School Action + categories (students were identified as those in need of additional support to ‘catch up’ to their peers) were removed and replaced with a ‘SEN Support’. For those children with significant learning needs, who had been assessed by the local authority, Statements of educational needs were to be replaced with Education Health and Care plans (EHCPs). These documents would collate input from social services and health services, outlining these children’s needs and what schools and other services would provide to meet these needs.

As with other Coalition reforms, “high challenge” was not necessarily accompanied by “high support”. In the case of SEND, the expectation that more children had their needs met through ‘quality-first teaching’ was not met with increased funding and resources. While some MATs may have put training and support in place to upskill their teachers, the results of many MATs pupils vulnerable to falling behind suggest this is not the case universally.¹⁵² A 2016 report by think tank LKMco, funded by the Youth Driver Trust explored how SEND reform was affecting children with SEND and found that “while some schools have thrived in a more autonomous system, others are struggling to provide high quality teaching and additional support for SEND learners”.¹⁵³

As with improving literacy teaching under the NLP and the NLS, for schools to rapidly improve SEND teaching this would need to be a priority of the school leadership, with the national goal aligning with school goals. However, surveys of headteachers’ priorities have found that schools are preoccupied with other training needs, such as dealing with curriculum and assessment reform. Working with Ipsos Mori, national information service The Key surveyed 1,180 school leaders in 2015. The top challenge for headteachers was the removal of National Curriculum levels, and then teacher workload; 75% of respondents had said they had found removal of National Curriculum levels difficult to manage over the past 12 months.¹⁵⁴ At the end of the parliament, with the bulk of assessment and curricula reforms yet to be embedded, it was likely that a school focus on SEND teaching in the coming parliament would be eclipsed by other training needs which did align with national targets: 85% reaching the new definition of ‘secondary school ready’.

Just as schools’ focus on SEND was reduced during the parliament, so too was its funding. In 2008, the Bercow Report raised concerns that SEN funding was not ring-fenced, running “the risk that those funds will be siphoned off, perhaps on a utilitarian motivation, to pay for the mass of pupils without SEN. The risk... is compounded as delegation [of responsibility for SEN spending to schools] is not accompanied by oversight or monitoring by the local authority. As a result, there appears to be a deficit of accountability”.¹⁵⁵ Eight years later, these concerns were still being echoed in reports on SEN provision. The Youth Driver Trust report spoke with SEND legal experts who warned that the lack of ring-fencing around the primary funding stream for SEND meant that schools could spend this money however they liked. The report also highlighted the fragmentation of the sector through academies (whose spending is not transparent and who are not maintained by the local authority) was exacerbating confused accountability for SEND services delivered in schools and potentially making it easier for schools to save money through cutting down on SEND expenditure.¹⁵⁶ Schools were required to make savings between 2010 and 2015 as their budgets did not rise in line with inflation. A 2015 NAO report into funding for disadvantaged children found that many schools were using pupil premium funding for SEN support, including speech and language therapy (unlike SEND funding, schools are accountable for Pupil Premium spending and have to explain to governors and inspectors how it is spent raising attainment). The authors raised concerns that pupil premium funding “could be replacing rather than supplementing [special educational needs funding]”.¹⁵⁷

Accountability for SEND may have become less robust over the Coalition period. As Local Authorities’ duties and funding were reduced, so too was their oversight of schools and their provision for SEND. The 2014 Children and Families Act required LAs to publish a ‘Local Offer’ of services for children with SEND which would set out available provision and how to access it; and make provision responsive to local need by directly involving SEND children and young people,

parents and service providers in its development and review.¹⁵⁸ The Youth Driver Trust report analysed the published Local Offers and found that 5% only listed schools as providers of services and a quarter were “so difficult to navigate that they appeared to be unfinished or incomplete”.¹⁵⁹ In 2016 Warwickshire Council’s ‘Local Offer’ was found to be unlawful, following reductions in services for disabled children and young people, to meet budget reductions, and the lack of a consultation process.¹⁶⁰ However, the law suit had to be brought by local disabled children and their parents; the failure of the local offer to meet statutory requirements had not been raised through routine scrutiny of local authorities. This points to a lack of accountability for statutory duties, as LAs’ roles have been phased out over the parliament.

In terms of the integrated EHCPs, there is another accountability gap. Although EHCPs have statutory force in schools, they do not in health or children’s services, meaning that the latter’s involvement in creating the plan and commitment to implementing it fall short of what schools must necessarily commit. The independent review of the pathfinder project for EHCPs revealed a mixed picture; whilst pathfinder families were more likely to perceive improved information sharing among professionals¹⁶¹ the interim report found “no significant improvement at that stage in relation to: ...professionals/services working closely together”.¹⁶²

In Summary

During the Coalition’s time in government, there was an important push closer to universal literacy at age 11, with 89% of all children reaching the previous ‘good’ level of reading, and 80% of children reaching the new ‘secondary school ready’ measure by 2015. There was also an important increase in attainment for underperforming groups, particularly disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs; both at a faster rate than national improvements.

This could be due to accountability changes which saw some schools prioritise attainment of disadvantaged pupils through the pupil premium (aligning the national goal of narrowing the attainment gap to the school’s goals of good measurements from Ofsted). As floor targets and the stakes of underperformance were raised during this period, more schools cleared them, with 85% of primary schools Good or Outstanding at the end of the parliament and far fewer Inadequate.¹⁶³

Michael Barber’s policy prescription was ‘high challenge, high support’. Many policies to raise the bar were planned in the Coalition’s period of government, but in the transition from a local-authority led system to a school-led system, many schools were left unsupported. A shift in governing style devolved the planning of expert-led resources and teacher training to a market, exacerbating a growing divide between better-financed, successful schools and poorly-funded, struggling ones. Reform will be fully implemented in the 2015-2020 parliament, after which time the effects of high challenge, low support will be seen. Combined with curriculum reform, capacity challenges and fiscal austerity, it is uncertain whether recent trends of improvement will continue, particularly for learners vulnerable to falling behind.

Looking forward to 2020

The strengths of previous primary school policy in boosting literacy levels included disseminating best practice in literacy teaching throughout the profession; developing clear goals for sector improvement; and holding schools to account for their delivery. The challenge over the next parliament will be in teachers and schools building on best practice to extend resources to the most vulnerable under-achievers, in the context of whole-scale reform of curricula, assessment, accountability and school structures – and cuts to education funding.

The Teaching of Reading

Following the 2015 General Election, the Conservative government have continued a focus on phonics teaching at KS1, to right the curricular imbalance in the NLS. However, there may be new imbalances in the current curriculum, including insufficient focus on structured vocabulary acquisition. This aspect of literacy may benefit from a similar ‘check’ as the one used to help schools identify children who are behind in phonics, and the new assessment for times tables, to ensure that children have a sufficiently broad vocabulary to reach an age-appropriate reading age by 11.

The upskilling of the workforce to deliver the new and challenging curriculum is a key challenge ahead. Recent research from the Social Market Foundation already found that schools in lower income communities were more likely to have less experienced, less qualified teachers without a degree in their subject.¹⁶⁴ The 2016 white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* set out plans to encourage MATs, publishers and others to develop and share teaching materials, textbooks and resources to help strengthen teachers’ delivery of the new national curriculum.¹⁶⁵ However, if these are traded, as with other professional development resources for schools, there is a risk that the weakest schools will not have access to them. Without these most vulnerable schools receiving upskilling resources on the new curriculum, it is hard to see how the national tail of underperformance in literacy will be substantially reduced.

Under the NLS, teachers’ practice developed in how to teach reading. However, best practice in how to differentiate teaching, to stretch the top performers and bring up children who were falling behind, was slower to develop and only could do so after teachers had mastered the new standard of teaching practice for the majority. It will be hard for schools and teachers to focus their resources and professional development on special educational needs and the children falling furthest behind now, when they are having to grapple with a new curriculum across KS1-2. We expect the FSM and SEND gaps to continue to stagnate or even to widen during this period of curriculum upheaval.

Professional Development and Capacity Building

Reading for Pleasure has clear links to reading outcomes. The Conservative government have sought to promote this through a programme to support 200 primary schools to set up book clubs.¹⁶⁶ However, more needs to be done to spread best practice in whole-school literacy to each one of the 16,766 primary schools in England. This includes skills in developing the teaching of reading, using data to target interventions and creating a culture of reading which captures the imagination of students. The 2016 white paper sets out an ambition for new National Professional Qualifications to be developed by experts in leadership roles within schools. It also announces an ‘Excellence in Leadership fund’ for MATs to develop leadership training for subject leaders working across groups

of schools. New Leadership qualifications should provide an opportunity for best practice in literacy leadership to be developed, certified and disseminated.

A significant challenge facing the ROGO goal is the human capital crisis, both in teacher recruitment and the pipeline to school leadership. A 2016 NAO report revealed that government had missed the teacher recruitment target for the past four years and that increasing numbers of teachers were leaving the profession.¹⁶⁷ Recent research from the Social Market Foundation has showed that schools serving low income communities are likely to have poorer retention rates.¹⁶⁸ Low teacher retention has been blamed on high workload as a result of curriculum and assessment reform; lack of capacity and support in the middle tier; and an erosion of pay and conditions through academisation and performance related pay mechanisms which have allowed headteachers to make savings by keeping staff on the same pay-scale, rather than automatically increasing their wages based on increasing years' experience. Meanwhile, decreasing numbers of teachers aspire to headship; a problem likely to hit primary schools worse, as they have a greater proportion of headteachers approaching retirement age.¹⁶⁹ This has been attributed to high stakes in school accountability, with a lack of a middle tier to advise and develop new heads. To reduce the effects of these high stakes on headteachers, the 2016 white paper sets out an Ofsted 'grace period' of 30 months without inspection when schools have a change of leader. The commitment to extend TSAs to have national coverage and to encourage all schools to become academies operating in MATs could help improve middle tier advice for headteachers. However, in the short term it could reduce middle tier protection for primary schools left under the local authority with diminishing capacity. There have also been concerns that this move to a school led system would mean many more successful headteachers leaving headship to become CEOs of MATs, creating a further driver of headship vacancies. Government must urgently re-assess the deal for teachers and headteachers, and increase incentives for progression.

Accountability & Collaboration

Reforms announced the 2016 white paper set out opportunities for more schools to be in collaborative structures and more funding for school improvement. The 2016 white paper suggests more schools will be in MATs by 2020 and pledges 300 extra teaching schools to cover areas most in need (they will no longer be required to be outstanding to qualify). As local authorities' roles in school improvement are phased out, schools will increasingly purchase services from their own budgets – a challenge for primaries operating on a smaller scale than secondaries. RSCs have been given new funding to purchase improvement services for failing schools who cannot afford improvement services, but it could still be challenging for all primaries to get the professional development and school improvement resources they need. MATs will now be more accountable for their outcomes, through new MAT league tables which take into account the results of different schools. This could encourage more MATs to share resources across their chains, reducing the cost for schools to use them, or introducing their own progressive system of support according to need. Teaching Schools ought also to be made accountable for the outcomes of the schools within their network to improve the quality of some services on offer, and to encourage more collaborative working.

The 2016 white paper announced that all schools would become academies by 2020. Though there were later concessions to legislation, which prohibited blanket conversion of schools in some

circumstances, the full academisation of the school system remains a stated ambition of the government. In January 2015, only 14.6% of primary schools were academies, meaning significant change for the remaining 85.4%. There have been several instances of Ofsted reporting that a school's quality has slipped, owing to its leadership and governance teams being distracted by the conversion process.¹⁷⁰ It may be a challenge for school leaders to keep focus on improving standards of literacy teaching during this period of upheaval.

Unlike in secondary schools, progress measures for primary schools will not be the main metric for accountability. Progress between KS1 and KS2 will be reported in league tables (although the baseline assessments remain optional, meaning many schools will not be able to publish data in 2022 which shows the progress of pupils across their primary school career). However, for floor standards (the minimum outcomes for schools, which trigger intervention if 'failed') will require *either* the school to achieve a sufficient average progress score in each key subject *or* that at least 65% of pupils meet the 'expected standard' in reading, writing and mathematics.¹⁷¹ This means that many schools can continue to focus on the majority passing a grade boundary, rather than investing funding and resources trying to increase the attainment of those falling furthest behind. Government need to reconsider proposals for a baseline test, to ensure primary schools are accountable for progress.

However, accountability alone is not the key to raising standards; as we saw in the successes of the National Literacy Strategy, this must be coupled with support to improve teaching. Over the coming parliament, however, there are significant funding challenges facing schools. Whilst per pupil funding has been protected in line with inflation, and will increase with the increase in pupil numbers, there has not been protection for the entire education budget. Historically, local authorities provided school improvement services including training and specialist services (including speech and language therapy) to schools. From 2002, academies have received the Education Services Grant (ESG) to purchase these themselves. The 2015 Autumn Budget cut the ESG from £820million to only £220million and the 2016 Summer Budget announced that by 2020 all schools would receive funding directly and local authorities' roles in school improvement would be phased out. This means that the funding of middle tier infrastructure (MATs and TSAs, replacing LAs) for services aside from day to day school running, will come primarily out of schools' day-to-day budgets and require groups of schools to allocate spending based on their school improvement priorities.

For children furthest behind, incentives must be in place to ensure schools and groups of schools invest in training and development to meet their needs. In improving the prospects of SEND children, vulnerable to falling behind, there is a double challenge of low and poor resourcing of support. Local Authorities will retain a role in "ensuring the needs of vulnerable children... are met" and leading "local inter-agency cooperation on education, health and social care" including supporting children with SEND.¹⁷² However, research suggests many LAs are struggling to do this. A 2016 Youth Driver Trust report into the impact of reforms to the SEND Code of Practice, which require that Local Authorities publish a Local Offer of services for children and young people with SEND, found that in practice LAs' 'Local Offers' differ in range and quality, and that many fail to publish these and are not held to account when they do so.¹⁷³ As Local Authorities have even less funding to provide services over the coming parliament, it is uncertain as to whether MATs and TSAs

will fill their place in creating specialist services and training, with no legal duty, extra funding or accountability incentive to do so.

Early Years Education

Early Years under New Labour

Early years as a policy area was ‘discovered’ in the early 90s, with Labour making early childhood support a ‘new frontier’ of the welfare state and expanding government responsibility over education to a new key stage. Access to early education became almost universal by the end of the period – contributing to a dramatic narrowing of the early literacy gap at age 5. However, a focus on quantity sometimes eclipsed improvement of quality. By 2010, 60% of poorer children still did not have good literacy level aged 5.

Key Strengths	Tensions & Challenges
How: Access to Early Education	
<p>Free entitlement to early education for 3 and 4 year olds allowed government to expand its oversight and transformed the unregulated childcare market into a key stage in education.</p> <p>Subsidy programmes created access to Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) providers in areas where they would not have otherwise been financially viable. By 2010, access for 3-5 year olds was almost universal. Thanks to maintained settings, the most deprived families had access to the highest quality early education.</p>	<p>Despite superior quality in the maintained sector, local authorities were made a ‘provider of last resort’ and expansion of places was entirely in the PVI sector, expanding providers which were of lowest quality in the most deprived areas.</p> <p>By 2010, the minority not taking up entitlement were still disproportionately deprived and vulnerable families - suggesting more outreach was needed.</p>
What: Curriculum & Accountability for Literacy Learning	
<p>The sector was made accountable through a new curriculum, final assessment and Ofsted inspections. This drove some poor quality providers out of the market and contributed to rising outcomes, particularly for deprived children.</p> <p>Health and parenting programmes were integrated with childcare in the poorest areas through Sure Start. These showed long-term positive impacts on home environment and children’s health.</p>	<p>By 2010 Ofsted and assessment scores showed local deprivation was still affecting outcomes. Planning and delivery of the curriculum was contingent on staff quality. Commitment to the mixed market meant it was harder to improve qualifications in PVIs in deprived areas.</p> <p>Sure Start was re-launched in 2007 to focus on quality education, eclipsing their role in health and parenting services and potentially reducing their impact on the home environment.</p>
Who: Professional Development towards Quality	
<p>Legislation, investment and a national workforce strategy all contributed to improving minimum qualifications in the workforce.</p> <p>The Graduate Leader Fund helped PVI providers hire more graduate staff. By the end of the period there were more qualified staff across the sector and settings in the most deprived areas had highest staff qualifications.</p>	<p>Poor quality vocational qualifications meant not all upskilling improved setting quality. The early years graduate role was not made equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), capping improvements in status, pay and recruitment.</p> <p>There was still a qualifications gap between PVI and maintained settings by the end of the decade, exacerbated by local deprivation.</p>

Discovering the Early Years

When New Labour came to power, Early Years was an important part of their policy agenda, framed as a key solution to the problems of childhood poverty, social exclusion and inequality of opportunity. Childhood poverty was to be reduced over the parliament through affordable childcare, helping parents back into work. Social exclusion would be tackled through locally-universal, user-led services to support child development, targeted at the poorest areas. Inequality of opportunity would be addressed through pre-school education which ensured some of the poorest children had a head-start.

Between 1997 and 2010 the rates of child poverty substantially reduced, although the target to halve relative poverty by 2010 was not met. By relative measures, 1.1 million children were lifted out of poverty, decreasing the national proportion from 26.7% in 1996/7 to 17.5% of the child population by 2010/11.¹⁷⁴ By absolute measures,^j child poverty was halved by 2004 and continued to drop after this point, falling to approximately 10% of the population by 2010, from a starting point of 26.7%.¹⁷⁵

When Labour came to power, there was less secure evidence on ‘what worked’ in raising children’s outcomes in early years than there had been in the development of the National Literacy Strategy. This resulted in more exploratory and iterative policy in the early years, as research was published and programmes evolved. As this new policy area sought definition, the three key goals of early years policy jostled for primacy: reducing child poverty, reducing social exclusion and reducing inequality of opportunity. Parental employment as a means of reducing child poverty was initially prioritised, leading to a historic rise in access to early years places. Reducing social exclusion waxed and waned as a secondary priority, over the course of Labour’s time in government. Towards the end of Labour’s thirteen years, a new priority – raised quality in early years, to boost equality of opportunity – gradually gained primacy.

How: Access to Early Education

In 1998 a Cross-Departmental Review of Provision for Young Children showed that early experiences of poverty could have long-lasting detrimental effects.¹⁷⁶ The review found that child poverty was more likely when children were very young because of parents’ limited ability to work. Therefore, to create a more equal society, it was crucial to reduce income poverty in families with young children.

Government sought this outcome through three types of policies: financial support; policies aimed at encouraging parents into work; and policies to reduce the cost and heighten the availability of childcare. Financial support included a mix of universal and progressive tax relief for families, with a new priority on younger children.¹⁷⁷ The National Minimum Wage improved the rewards of returning to work for the lower paid, especially for women and part time workers; and in-work credit gave a top up to lone parents in their first year re-entering the job market.¹⁷⁸ The third policy plank was access to quality affordable childcare, and brought government oversight to a hitherto largely unregulated sector.

^j with a baseline of relative child poverty in 1998 - 60% the median income in this year.

In 1997, early child care and education provision was split across two main sectors and highly fragmented within each. Approximately a million childcare places were in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector, comprised of parent-led playgroups, childminders and day nurseries providing care for children 0-4.¹⁷⁹ A further half a million places for 3 and 4 year olds existed in the maintained sector, which spanned nursery and reception classes in junior or primary schools and stand-alone nursery schools.¹⁸⁰

By 1998, the New Labour government had laid out its National Childcare Strategy (NCS) which included the universal policy of free part-time nursery places for 4 year olds (and a pledge of extension to 3 year olds, which was realised in 2004). This entitlement replaced the 'nursery voucher' scheme introduced in 1996 by the Major Conservative government, whereby parents 'who wanted it' were offered £1,000 a year towards nursery care for their 4 year olds. The new entitlement policy aimed for universal uptake and provided funding for 2.5 hours a day, 33 weeks a year for providers of the entitlement (increasing in 2010 to 15 hours a week, to be used flexibly, for 38 weeks a year). The entitlement was enacted alongside new powers for Local Authorities to register, fund and develop all providers of the free entitlement. The 'Foundation Stage' was born: elevating the 3-5 age range from childcare services (often a peripheral concern of employment or health ministries) to *education* services, integrated under the Department for Education and Skills.

Entitlement led to greater government oversight of the 'Foundation Stage' but New Labour remained committed to 'parental choice' and a mixed market of provision, to allow flexibility for parents to organise childcare and education around employment needs, particularly important for those in lower paid shift work. Entitlement funding was demand-side, following the child, and could be taken up in the maintained sector (whose nurseries usually offered 'sessional', part-time nursery places in the morning or afternoon), or as a contribution towards longer day care (an option normally found in PVI settings). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this led to an increase in places primarily in the PVI sector, which was better able to accommodate working hours.¹⁸¹ Subsequent analysis by the LSE revealed that the total number of places in the maintained sector actually declined between 1999 and 2006.¹⁸² In Labour's third term these maintained places recovered to previous levels but this later rise reflected increasing numbers of maintained schools taking 4 year olds in their reception classes alongside 5 year olds (mandatory school age), rather than an expansion in maintained *nursery* places for 3 and 4 year olds, as a result of the entitlement policy.¹⁸³

Left to natural market forces, the increase in the PVI sector meant availability of childcare places was much worse in poorer areas, where these settings struggled to run profitably. The per child entitlement was insufficient to cover costs of premises and staff, so settings cross-subsidised entitlement places. While the maintained sector could do this easily with funding from their school budgets, PVI settings relied on fees for younger children and additional hours beyond the 2.5 daily entitlement – a challenge in the most deprived wards, where few could afford paid childcare.¹⁸⁴

To meet their goal of reducing childhood poverty, government initiated supply-side funding streams to subsidise the market in the most deprived wards in the country. Local Authorities were empowered to match demand with supply, oversee the provision of entitlement places and distribute funding (though they were made the provider of last resort in terms of actually providing the childcare and education).¹⁸⁵

The Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative (NNI) was launched in 2001 to increase the number of providers in poorer areas. Funding was allocated according to deprivation by postcode (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices – IDACI). The NNI was intended to offer full daycare from birth to school age, alongside other family support services. It would create 45,000 new early education places by 2004.

An independent evaluation by researchers from the IFS, the National Centre for Social Responsibility and Oxford University found that the NNI was effective in increasing the number of childcare places in the most disadvantaged areas of the country, with just under three quarters of the NNIs located in the 30% most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.¹⁸⁶ As with the pattern of free entitlement places, the growth of NNI places was dominated by the PVI sector. Of the 1,400 NNI nurseries established by 2005, 20% were run by maintained providers compared to 40% private, 23% voluntary and 17% ‘joint’ providers, where the LA worked with a PVI provider.¹⁸⁷

From 2004, NNIs were subsumed into the Sure Start Children’s Centres programme which saw these on-site integrated service providers rolled out across the country, starting with the poorest wards. Those Sure Start Children’s Centres in the 30% most deprived areas had to host 10 hours a day on-site childcare, which was often provided by PVI partners working with the centre. By 2004, the ‘access’ gap by area deprivation had narrowed significantly. Whereas in 1999 there was an estimated 9 percentage point gap between access in the most and least deprived areas (71% and 82% respectively), by 2004 this was just a 3 percentage point gap (92% and 93% respectively).¹⁸⁸

Table 2.1: Use of some early years education, by income bracket

Annual family income	Less than £10,000	£10,000 - £19,999	£20,000 - £31,999	£32K+	Total access
1999	65%	80%	81%	83%	77%
2004	91%	92%	95%	98%	94%

Source: Bryson, C., Kazimirski, A. and Southwood, H. (2006), *Childcare and Early Years Provision: A Study of Parents’ Use, Views and Experiences*, Research Report RR723, London, DfES.

By 2010, 98% of all 4 year olds and 92% of all 3 year olds were accessing their entitlement to free part-time education.¹⁸⁹ As data was not collected on the PVI sector prior to 2000 and included ‘double-counting’ from that period onwards of entitlement and non-entitlement places, it is difficult to quantify the exact increase in uptake. However, a survey carried out by the National Centre for Social Research with a representative sample of parents, gives us some indication.¹⁹⁰ This data indicates that approximately 84% of 4 year olds and 64% of 3 year olds were participating in early education in 2001, suggesting a significant increase in access over Labour’s three terms in government.¹⁹¹ This near universal coverage of entitlement shows that disadvantaged families were benefitting from the policy; outcomes for poorer children rose since they began to be recorded.

Table 2.2: Percentage of children achieving a ‘good’ level of development by free school meal (FSM) eligibility, 2007-12

	2006-7	2007-08	2008-9	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
FSM pupils	27.9	31.5	34.5	39.5	43.7	48
All other pupils	49.1	52.1	54.8	59.0	62.1	67
Gap (percentage points)	21.1	20.6	20.3	19.5	18.4	19

Source: DfE (2012) *Early Years Foundation Stage attainment by pupil characteristics in England*

Despite record numbers of parents accessing childcare for children aged 3 to 5 at the end of the decade, an annual survey of parents found that the small percentage not taking up entitlement remained dominated by marginalised groups, including lower-income families and mothers with low educational qualifications.¹⁹² Gigantic strides towards universal provision for ages 3-4 had happened over this period, but at the end of Labour's time in government there was still work to be done to reach the most marginalised families and their children.

Quality over quantity

The aims of the National Childcare Strategy were not just to improve access to childcare, however. A key goal of the raft of policies was to improve children's "outcomes... including readiness to learn by the time they reach school".¹⁹³ The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) was a longitudinal study started in 1997 to research the long term effects on children's outcomes and determine the features of quality which increased or inhibited these outcomes. The first EPPE report in 2004 provided clear evidence that the *quality* of education and childcare was crucial in determining children's outcomes – the higher the quality, the better children did, with some poor quality provision even having a detrimental impact.¹⁹⁴ This report found that 'quality' (as measured by Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales) was highly correlated with staff qualifications.¹⁹⁵ Quality settings with better outcomes also integrated care and education, able to support improvement in the home learning environment through work with parents.¹⁹⁶

However, the review of NNI found that staff in private nurseries worked longest hours and had the lowest qualifications. And whilst maintained and joint sector NNI nurseries were likely to be located on school sites (66% and 44% respectively), voluntary and private were much less likely (28% and 14% respectively) – limiting their access to qualified teachers. PVI nurseries were also less likely to offer integrated services: whilst the majority of maintained and joint sector NNIs were linked to local Sure Start programmes (70% and 59% respectively), comparatively few private NNIs were (22%).¹⁹⁷

The pattern in the NNI was replicated across the wider sector. Whilst it was mandatory to employ a trained teacher in nursery and reception classes, this was not the case in PVI settings – meaning that PVIs were much less likely to have a graduate. They were even less likely to in poorer areas, where the cross-subsidy was often unable to cover graduate wages before settings could break even or run a profit.¹⁹⁸ The LSE analysed how setting type and area deprivation was related to settings' Ofsted grades and found that the PVI sector was likely to be of poorer quality on average, and particularly poor quality in areas of deprivation.¹⁹⁹

On average this was *not* of detriment to poorer children aged 3 and 4: in the poorest areas, maintained settings dominated provision. This meant that by the end of Labour's time in office, a high the level of local deprivation increased the likelihood of a child taking up entitlement in a quality setting with a graduate.²⁰⁰ This relationship between deprivation and setting quality was U-shaped, meaning the least and most deprived had access to the best quality.²⁰¹ In areas where poorer children were a minority though, or where maintained settings in areas of deprivation did not meet full demand, a smaller group of poorer children using the PVI setting for their entitlement were still at risk of low quality early years education, which could compound disadvantage in the long term.

What: Curriculum and Accountability

The expansion of government funding within the early years sector created a mechanism to drive up quality in the education being provided. As with the National Literacy Strategy, a major pillar in raising the quality of early years provision was the standardising of the curriculum.

The Early Years Curriculum

National guidelines on the desirable learning outcomes for children before starting school had first been introduced in 1996, under the Conservative government.²⁰² Via the Nursery Vouchers programme of the same year, government could influence the curriculum of settings who were eligible for vouchers, which contributed £1,000 towards the care of four year old children in a provider of their parents' choice.²⁰³ New Labour's entitlement policy was universal and brought many more providers under government guidance.

New regulatory arrangements allowed government to extend curriculum influence, with Local Authorities gaining power to inspect providers of entitlement against the curricula 'learning outcomes'. Following consultation, these were revised and relaunched as Early Learning Goals in 2000.²⁰⁴ These goals for 3 and 4 year olds were published alongside detailed curriculum guidance, covering six areas of learning:

- Personal, social and emotional development (PSE);
- Communication, language and literacy (CLL);
- Mathematical development (MD);
- Knowledge and understanding of the world (KUW);
- Physical development (PD); and
- Creative development (CD).

The Early Learning Goals had an accompanying Foundation Stage Profile, against which children's development age 5 could be measured, with Local Authorities asked to collect a sample of outcomes to gauge the quality of local provision. In 2001, regulation of early education settings was brought in line with the rest of the education sector, and transferred from Local Authorities to Ofsted, under the Children Act 1989. As with the NLS, these two accountability measures of exams and inspection would be used to drive up standards in meeting education goals.

By 2006, the Children's Act had brought learning from 0 to 5 under a single framework and made the curriculum of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) mandatory across all registered settings, not just those delivering the entitlement. The summative assessment of the key stage – the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) – also became mandatory from 2008.²⁰⁵ An Ofsted review of the impact of introducing EYFS pointed to its implementation (and Ofsted's inspection against it) as a factor in removing poor providers from the market. Inspection data showed that 16% of providers who left the sector since the EYFS was introduced had been judged inadequate (compared with only 2% of providers who had remained active) implying that failing to meet the rigour of curriculum planning laid out in the EYFS was encouraging poor providers to close.²⁰⁶ Between 2007 and 2010 the proportion of providers who were Good or Outstanding rose from 56% to 68%.²⁰⁷

The Department for Children, Schools and Families undertook qualitative exploration of the EYFS and investigated how it had affected practitioners in six regions of England from its implementation to 2010. Focus groups and interviews with a sample of 190 practitioners were used to provide an indication of how the EYFS had influenced day to day practice and supported improvements.²⁰⁸ Practitioners described how the single curriculum had helped improve integration of education and care; drawing closer links between children’s learning and their wellbeing and development. This made practitioners feel that their work towards holistic child development was recognised as part of a distinct set of skills within the broader education sector; at the same time the curriculum implied a parity between teachers following a National Curriculum and early years practitioners delivering the EYFS – professionalising the workforce, particularly those working in settings not on school sites.²⁰⁹ The integration of care and education encouraged communication between different professionals, with practitioners in children’s centres particularly aware of this since EYFS’ introduction.

The qualitative review also indicated that planning for progression had been positively affected by the EYFS. While most practitioners “claimed that they had always made observations of children” those interviewed described “that their observations were now more systematic, more purposeful and more child-friendly”.²¹⁰ This formalising of assessment through observation and planning against a curriculum was described as allowing stronger continuity over age-phases and consistency across more and less experienced practitioners.²¹¹ Practitioners also described it as supporting early identification and intervention for children falling behind.²¹² The EYFS was a crucial step of changing the work of early years providers from *childcare* to providing *early education*.

Pupil outcomes following the introduction of the FSP showed increasing proportions of 5 year old reaching a Good Level of Development^k (GLD). Although the median score over this period did not change, a consistent improvement in outcomes for the lowest 20% of achievers meant that the variance in outcomes narrowed and the overall percentage reaching GLD improved from 45% to 56%.²¹³ This data corroborated Ofsted’s analysis that significant underperformance was being reduced.

Table 2.3: Percentage of 5 years olds achieving a Good Level of Development from 2006 to 2010 in Communication, Literacy and Language (CLL) components and in Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSE)²¹⁴

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Language for communication & thinking	78	78	79	82	84
Linking sounds and letters	61	65	71	74	77
Reading	68	69	70	72	74
Writing	57	58	61	62	65
Total PSE + CLL	45	46	49	52	56

Data taken from Statistical First Releases²¹⁵

Of the communication, language and literacy (CLL) component of the FSP, phonological awareness (the ability to link sounds and letters) made the most pronounced improvements over the period

^k A Good Level of Development is defined by meeting or exceeding the expected level in each of the elements of the EYFS curriculum

which was measured. In 2010, Ofsted undertook qualitative research across 68 early years providers to explore the impact of the EYFS curriculum, particularly in children's outcomes in PSE and in CLL. It found that "all types of provider can and do deliver the learning and development requirements of the EYFS well" but that maintained schools had sustained a high quality of early years provision, particularly in developing communication, language and literacy skills.²¹⁶ Maintained school settings in the study were more likely to plan activities specifically targeted at children's learning and development.²¹⁷ The research found that where outcomes were good and outstanding in CLL, this could be traced back to specific training in developing language skills or delivering phonics.²¹⁸ It was becoming clear that professional development was key to children's literacy development and to changing child carers into early educators.

However, Ofsted's report found that maintained settings often had stronger professional development, linked to a longer history of delivering EYFS curriculum in the case of settings on school sites. These settings also had more accountability through the FSP. Because the Profile took place age 5, the legal school age, maintained settings on school sites were more directly accountable for the outcomes of children that had passed through their care, in a way that PVI providers were not. While the best local authorities tracked pupils from setting to school and used this information to inform inspection and professional development in PVIs, this was not the case in the majority of areas.²¹⁹

This gulf in quality between the PVI and maintained sectors was exacerbated by deprivation. The Ofsted review was one of many to highlight this. Inspection data showed "the more deprived the area, the lower the average quality of the provision".²²⁰ This difference in quality was translated into pupil outcomes. In 2009, half of the lowest achieving quintile of children lived in the 30% most deprived areas.²²¹ Differences in local deprivation mapped onto national geography with an uneven picture of both progress and overall achievement across the country. For instance, whilst the South West had very high proportions of LAs with good overall outcomes and smaller achievement gaps between the bottom 20% and the average attainment, settings in the East of England underperformed against 'statistical neighbours' – providers with similar socioeconomic profiles in other local authorities.²²² DCSF analysis in 2009 estimated that local deprivation (measured by IDACI) explained 14% of variance in performance across local authorities.²²³

SureStart: Linking Language and the Home

The link between deprivation and children's outcomes aged 5 was not purely due to the quality of early education. Findings from the EPPE report emphasised the importance of parenting and stimulation in the home. The 2004 report stated that the quality of the home learning environment quality was "more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are."²²⁴ Prior to the report, there had been a growing body of evidence demonstrating the long-term positive effects on children of early childhood interventions— particularly those which changed parenting behaviours.²²⁵ Integrated early childhood services which could improve parenting skills, help families back into employment and provide access to good early education were recognised as crucial to breaking inter-generational cycles of poverty. These integrated family services were heralded 'the new frontier for the welfare state'.²²⁶

A year after Labour first came to power, Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) was announced. The programmes were to begin in 250 areas of high deprivation (covering 51% of families under the national poverty line).²²⁷ The DfEE described the programme as ‘key to the [UK] Government’s drive to prevent social exclusion, raise educational standards, reduce health inequalities and promote opportunity’.²²⁸ SSLPs would ‘coordinate, streamline and add value’ to a range of existing local services including early education, health and family support – services which had hitherto been uncoordinated, inconsistent and often failed to focus on children below four.²²⁹ The area-based nature of SSLPs sought to reduce stigma by offering access to anyone in the local radius. As SSLPs were placed in areas of high deprivation, it was thought that this locally-universal approach would increase access for ‘hard-to-reach’ ‘sub-populations’, including lone parents and teenage mothers.

The Cross-Departmental Review recommended that SSLP services were jointly planned by relevant bodies within and outside the local authority. Each SSLP was designed to be run by a partnership of parents, local people, and representatives from health, local government and children’s services. In contrast to New Labour’s school policy initiatives, this more experimental programme did not prescribe a centrally specified set of interventions.²³⁰ Instead, objectives for Sure Start’s outcomes were coupled with flexibility over process, intending to be locally responsive.²³¹ Norman Glass, the civil servant charged with their design, described the respect inherent in the local parental model as a key element in ensuring both the sustainability and the inclusivity of Sure Start. Framing previous models of intervention as patronising, Glass was passionate about Sure Start as an empowering enterprise: “[b]ecause those who benefited would be able to shape it to do what they wanted... it would not be seen as just another initiative by Whitehall to do something about the feckless proles”.²³² Later, critics would point to this lack of central clarity and uniform measurement of success as a weakness in evidencing Sure Start’s value and protecting it from later cuts.²³³

By 2003 the Sure Start programme had expanded and there were 524 SSLPs operating around the country. Despite disappointing early results, longer term research found positive effects of the early programme on parenting with less harsh discipline being used and a more stimulating home learning environment in the ‘treatment group’.¹ The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) showed early benefits to Sure Start children’s non-cognitive skills, when compared to the non-SSLP families, though these ‘faded out’ by age 5. At this age, the Sure Start children still had better physical health than their counterparts without SSLP and were less likely to be overweight.²³⁴ By the age of 7 (4 years after the intervention), cognitive and social development indicators had faded out. However, NESS analyses explained that educational added value was hard to isolate as entitlement to free childcare was rolled out with almost universal take-up.²³⁵ The non-SSLP areas still had access to early childhood education, the key services they were without were the parent-aimed interventions in the SSLP. It was therefore encouraging that parenting style differences seemed to remain over a substantial period of time. NESS argued it was “very likely” that having less chaotic and violent home environments would yield benefits to children’s long-term educational, economic and societal inclusion over time.²³⁶

¹ For the NESS study, children in SSLP areas were matched with those in areas with similar socio-economic demographics, but which had not had a Sure Start Local Programme. This matched group operated as a type of ‘control’ against which the ‘treatment’ group could be measured.

Early Excellence Centres (EECs) were established at a similar time to SSLPs, with a focus on driving up the quality of early years education. These Centres were intended to be 'one-stop shops' where parenting support, health and community services could be accessed *on the same site* (in SSLPs, often services were coordinated centrally but families would be signposted to different venues to use those services). EECs were designed to integrate these services with adult education and education and childcare for children under five. They were also tasked with raising the quality of other local early education providers through training for local practitioners. This emphasis meant EECs were usually on sites of existing best practice in early education. Unlike SSLPs, these settings had to evidence quality when they bid for EEC status and the accompanying funding. Although EECs were not targeted to certain areas, by virtue of their remit, the majority were nevertheless located in deprived areas where improvements in quality were most needed.²³⁷

Ofsted inspected a sample of the EECs between 2001 and 2003, to explore their success in integrating child and adult education.²³⁸ Their report found that three quarters of the EECs inspected were good or better and that children made good progress in the Foundation Stage curriculum, even when they had low starting points. Children with complex SEN made particularly good progress. Inspectors found that there was a "strong association between the overall effectiveness of centres, the quality of nursery education and the leadership" of the centres.²³⁹ These findings and those from the early National Evaluations of Sure Start led to a new programme incorporating the best practice from SSLPs' parenting interventions and EECs' education, childcare and local training: Sure Start Children's Centres. The programme was rolled out from 2004, converting all SSLPs, EECs and most Neighbourhood Nursery Initiatives (NNIs) into Sure Start Children's Centres, with early education, health and adult support services able to be accessed on site.

The local area approach of SSLPs had been critiqued by both NESS and the Daycare Trust, who argued that not all disadvantaged children lived in deprived areas.²⁴⁰ This argument was strengthened by NESS' early findings, which suggested the approach had lessened access for the most severely disadvantaged families.^{m 241} The new Sure Start Children's Centres were therefore intended to be a universal provision, rolled out in three stages covering progressively more affluent areas.²⁴² From 2004-2006, 800 centres were established in the 20% most deprived areas, with a further 2,500 in the 30% most deprived over the next two years. From 2008 to 2010, 1,000 more centres were established, meeting the target of 3,000 nationally – one for every 800 children.²⁴³ The experimental bent of SSLP, with different local programmes, had made the initiative very difficult to accurately evaluate.²⁴⁴ The experimental stage over, in the new iteration of the policy Government standardised the services Sure Start Children Centres were expected to offer. The *Core Offer*²⁴⁵ included childcare, family support, parental outreach, family health services (including speech and language therapy) and links with jobcentres.

^m The first NESS study showed most marginalised families in SSLP areas had *less* access to services compared to their counterparts in non-SSLP areas. Sure Start architect Naomi Eisenstadt attributed some of this to the community-led approach, commenting that "in the poorest communities, the slightly less poor are highly likely to exclude the poorest". Other causes pointed at were the initial focus on new buildings and start-up costs detracting from service delivery and the fact that time to plan the new centres meant not all services were fully functioning in the initial stage of the project. This finding in the early stages of SSLP was not found in any later reviews, once the programme was more established.

Accountability also changed at this time, with responsibility for integration of services placed on Local Authorities. The Every Child Matters Agenda prompted the development of Directors of Children's Services who would coordinate integrated services around the children in their LA from 2006.²⁴⁶ Control of Sure Start Children's Centres and their services came under this purview.

The new Children's Centres had a stronger emphasis on childcare and education, which had been shown by EPPE to have a significant effect on children's outcomes. The *core offer* stipulated Children's Centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas should offer a minimum of 10 hours a day integrated early learning and childcare (in the 70% least disadvantaged areas, Children's Centres could elect to provide childcare and need only offer drop-in 'stay and play' sessions).²⁴⁷ A NESS study of Children's Centre day care between 2006 and 2008 found a strong link between the quality of the education setting and language development. Controlling for family and area background characteristics, NESS analysis found "the higher the pre-school childcare quality, the higher the child's attainment in language development as measured by the British Ability Scale (BAS) for 'Naming Vocabulary'" as well as with the communication and language component of the Foundation Stage Profile score.²⁴⁸ The same study found quality closely correlated with staff qualifications. Yet, the majority of staff were not well qualified, with most holding qualifications at Level 3 (A level equivalent). Of the different providers of childcare and education within children's centres, voluntary sector providers were found to have poorer qualifications and maintained school settings to have the best qualified staff.²⁴⁹ It was clear that children's outcomes and setting quality was heavily contingent on staff qualifications, and there was pressing need to improve these, particularly amongst PVI providers.

The shift in focus to education quality in Sure Start was a key government intervention in the market to ensure access and quality in the poorest communities. This contributed to the later observed U-shaped relationship between quality settings with graduates and levels of deprivation, whereby the most deprived would be accessing best quality at the beginning of the next decade.²⁵⁰ However, some involved in the early establishment of Sure Start (including Norman Glass) felt this shift reflected a 'capturing' of Sure Start by the employability agenda.²⁵¹ They argued the new Children's Centres brought together jobcentre plus services and childcare places to meet the demands of employability and reducing child poverty at the expense of the child-centred developmental approach of early SSLPs. This included the health and parenting services which had shown success in the early years of SSLP and which the longitudinal research of NESS later evidenced to have long-term impacts on children's physical health and families' home environments, including amongst vulnerable subgroups like lone parents and teen mothers. NAO evaluations showed that the earliest Sure Start Centres had the most effective parental outreach²⁵² and evidence presented to an Education Committee investigation in 2010 suggested later Children's Centres were not funded adequately to do this child-centred, parental education and health work.²⁵³

Who: Professional Development

Over New Labour's period in government, raising staff quality and qualifications became increasingly important.

Initially New Labour had paid little attention to the early years workforce, with the most significant first term policy being an introduction of minimum staff qualifications for each setting in 2001. *National standards for under eights day care and childminding* detailed requirements for every setting to have a manager and other supervisory staff qualified to at least a Level 3 (A-level equivalent) and at least 50% of other staff qualified to Level 2 (GCSE equivalent).²⁵⁴ In the run up to this being enforced, there was debate in the sector as to how appropriate this was - many criticised the requirements as too low. Sector newspaper *Nursery World* led a campaign calling for requirements to be raised to 50% of all staff qualified at Level 3 and for Level 2 to be a qualification minimum for the sector. The campaign also argued managers ought to have at least two years' experience.²⁵⁵ Despite this, the government's lower minimum requirements became mandatory, with the Secretary of State insisting these were to be understood as minimum qualifications rather than a reflection of best practice.²⁵⁶

Government's attempts to recruit at this time were characterised by a drive to meet entitlement demand, with a focus on quantity of new staff entering, rather than prior qualifications and experience. Statements from the Secretary of State discussing the Sure Start recruitment campaign framed government approach as encouraging non-working people to join the sector and gain relevant qualifications on the job.²⁵⁷ From 1998, this led to an increase of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in childcare, which could be gained in the workplace, at Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) and Level 3 (A-level equivalent).²⁵⁸ By 2004, 51% of the workforce had at least a Level 3 NVQ, compared to 29% a decade earlier.²⁵⁹

However, increasingly research was indicating that higher staff qualifications were crucial to raising quality of provision and outcomes – particularly for the most deprived. The most formative piece of research was the EPPE project. This longitudinal research followed a sample of 3,000 children with experience of different settings (including maintained, PVI and home care as a 'no pre-school' comparison group). It sought to determine the effects of pre-school as well as the effective practice (and pedagogy) which led to better outcomes.

The first findings in 2004 showed long term effects of high quality pre-school, still significantly related to attainment once children were aged 6.²⁶⁰ The research indicated that vulnerable groups were particularly likely to benefit from quality early education. Disadvantaged children were found to have an increased risk of anti-social behaviour before age 3, but this was reduced by age 5 after quality pre-school. "Whilst not eliminating disadvantage, pre-school can help ameliorate the effects... investing in good quality pre-school provision can be seen as an effective measure in achieving targets concerning social exclusion and breaking cycles of disadvantage," the report stated.²⁶¹ As well as reducing behavioural issues which could form a barrier to learning, quality pre-school also seemed to reduce learning-specific Special Educational Needs (SEN). The proportion of children 'at risk' of developing learning difficulties dropped from 1 in 3 to 1 in 5 between starting pre-school and starting school, suggesting that pre-school could be an effective intervention to keep children on track developmentally.²⁶²

Yet quality of pre-school was closely linked to the qualification of staff, particularly to the presence of *trained teachers* involved in curriculum planning. This was linked specifically with improved outcomes in pre-reading skills aged 5, echoing findings from a parallel study of the Neighbourhood

Nursery Initiative (NNI).^{263 264} The presence of trained teachers improved the structure of activities and “the capacity of staff to stimulate children’s communication.”²⁶⁵ It was clear from both studies that improving workforce qualifications would be key to increasing setting quality and thereby raising children’s literacy skills. In both studies, PVI settings were most likely to need this improvement; meanwhile ‘integrated centres’ (nurseries that had offered health and family support services) and nursery schools were most likely to already be high quality.²⁶⁶

In the same year as EPPE’s first publication, the government published its 10 year strategy for childcare: *Choice for parents, the best start for children*.²⁶⁷ Alongside further announcements on EYFS, entitlement hours, Working Tax Credits and powers for Ofsted, the strategy had a new focus on the number of graduates in early years settings, admitting that the “single biggest factor that determines the quality of childcare is the workforce”.²⁶⁸

The Children’s Workforce Development Council was established to advise government on a new qualification and career structure. In 2005, the Children’s Workforce Strategy (CWS) expanded on commitments in the 10 year childcare strategy, with details of the new graduate-level category of staff - an Early Years Professional (EYP) - to lead practice in every setting. Maintained schools providing nursery education were already required to involve qualified teachers, and the CWS proposed extending a similar graduate workforce to the 20,000 PVI nursery settings. Given the large scale of recruitment this would require, the proposal was to be rolled out in three stages: a graduate early years’ professional in all 3,500 planned children’s centres by 2010; an EYP in every full daycare setting across England by 2015; and a longer-term vision of an EYP in every Foundation Stage setting.²⁶⁹

In order to meet these ambitious new targets, significant investment was needed to help settings afford graduate staff, particularly in the PVI sector and in poorer areas. A £125m a year Transformation Fund was established in 2006 to help settings hire staff with higher qualifications or to sponsor the training of existing staff, particularly targeted at helping reduce the quality gap between the PVI and maintained sectors. In 2007, this became the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF) and focused on working towards the target of every PVI sector employing a graduate or EYP by 2015.

Every Child a Talker

Every Child a Talker (ECaT). Launched in 2008, Every Child a Talker (ECaT) was a universal level programme covering all English local authorities by 2011. It was designed to improve the skills of the early years workforce in supporting speech, language and communication development in preschool children (mainly 3-5 year olds). ECaT was delivered by early language consultants (speech and language therapists and specialist teachers) working alongside identified practitioners in specific early years settings across the local authority. It targeted practitioners and parents and was designed to help them set up environments that support a child’s language and communication development. It focused on everyday experiences and opportunities, building on children’s interests. The aim of ECaT was to enable children to start school as confident and skilled communicators, with parents and practitioners who have an increased awareness, knowledge and involvement in children’s language development. An evaluation of the programme found that it was associated with a fall in the number of children who were judged to be behind, or at risk of falling behind, in the key aspects of language and communication. Some local authorities continue to run programmes that have their roots in ECaT, though there is no longer central funding to support these programmes.²⁷⁰

The Children's Workforce Development Council were responsible for embedding training for EYPs across the sector. However, they raised concerns in 2009 that restrictions in access to their training meant the EYP risked being seen as a qualification specifically for PVI providers.²⁷¹ This potentially undermined the status of the qualification. The CWDC described the restriction in training access as "unnecessarily divisive" and "undermin[ing] our efforts to create a unified and motivated graduate profession leading the [EYFS]".²⁷² The CWDC also raised concerns that Early Years Practitioner Status was not equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) used in schools. It therefore would not attract the same pay or be as portable across the maintained education sector.

The status of the EYP was particularly important in terms of ongoing recruitment to the sector. There were two pathways to the qualification: the first a 'validation' of very well qualified practitioners with a wealth of sector experience; the second a longer training pathway, which upskilled candidates in the sector who were initially less well qualified (in 2008 half of the candidates enrolled on this route had foundation degree qualifications). CWDC data from 2009 showed that the numbers going through the 'validation' route were rapidly declining as the pool eligible candidates emptied.²⁷³ Whilst the number of candidates enrolling in the training route increased, it was a concern that the route needed to be sufficiently attractive in terms of pay and status to continue attracting applicants. Without increased pay and status, the CWDC worried the targets of an EYP in every full daycare setting by 2015 and an EYP in every EYFS in the longer term would both be missed.

Graduates were not the only answer to increasing quality; research had shown raising general levels of staff qualifications was also important.²⁷⁴ Alongside efforts to increase graduate numbers, therefore, local authorities were made responsible for upskilling the early years sector through the Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP). The duty came into effect in 2006 and National Early Years Strategy guidance for EYQISP was published in 2008.²⁷⁵ As with the National Literacy Strategy, the programme had layers of accountability, which worked to inform targeted professional development. The Local Authority were expected to help settings self-assess and to create action plans for improvement. This knowledge of individual settings' strengths and weaknesses was in turn to inform a Local Authority improvement plan for early years. The LA plan dictated the professional development opportunities which would be on offer to settings, through LA Early Years Consultants (EYCs), scaffolding setting self-improvement.²⁷⁶

Over New Labour's successive terms in government, qualifications of the early years workforce rose, with the biggest improvements in lower qualification levels.²⁷⁷ By 2010 72% of the workforce was qualified to at least Level 3, meaning government targets were well exceeded.²⁷⁸ However, analysis of the sector by an LSE academic detailed the pressures on providers to pass those studying for Level 3 NVQs. The research found that many of these new L3 holders were school leavers with low grades (only 37% of childcare workers with L3 NVQs in childcare had 5 'good' GCSEs as school leavers by 2008). Findings raising a question mark over the extent to which increases in lower level qualifications held by the workforce reflected substantively improved skills or sector quality.²⁷⁹

Increases in graduate staff has been less contested. Increase was initially modest, rising from 2.7% of the workforce in 1994-98 to 4.4% in 2004-2008.²⁸⁰ By 2010 the childcare providers survey found that 13% of the workforce were graduates.²⁸¹ An independent review of the GLF showed that gaining a graduate leader with EYP status significantly improved the quality of provision in a setting, compared to a control group of settings that did not gain an EYP.²⁸² FSP scores over this period continued to rise as more children accessed entitlement in graduate settings with an EYP.

By the time Labour left office, 80% of children from the poorest areas had a graduate in their setting.²⁸³ However, mandatory graduate qualifications in maintained settings skewed this statistic. Restricting analysis to the PVI sector revealed a U-shaped relationship between deprivation and the presence of a graduate, which may have been explained by government subsidies and GLF funding for PVI settings in the poorest areas.²⁸⁴ Across the country a large qualifications gap remained between the maintained and the PVI sectors, with the majority of children in the latter accessing entitlement in settings without a graduate.²⁸⁵

In Summary

The success of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in boosting literacy levels aged 11 was in significant part down to clear goals, targeted support and strong universal accountability. Early years policy of the same period was characterised by competing goals, which led to an initial prioritising of quantity of early education places over the quality. The goal of reducing child poverty through paternal employment shaped government commitment to a flexible mixed market in childcare and early education and a reluctance to expand maintained provision. The extension of access to childcare and of government regulation meant outcomes for the lowest performing 20% steadily increased. However, the expansion of PVI rather than maintained settings did not ensure quality and preserved a fractured provider infrastructure which would limit the extent of both government 'support' and 'challenge'.

In the NLS, the local authority infrastructure supported the cascading of best practice. Coupled with accountability, this led to significant change in classroom practice and raised outcomes. The Early Years Strategy also had a cascade infrastructure, with an Early Years Consultant in every local authority. However, maintaining a market of diverse, small providers meant that there were 16,700 registered providers of full day care by 2010 (an increase of 4,000 from 2006)²⁸⁶ – a large number for LAs to contend with. Meanwhile, the ambition for an Early Years Practitioner in every setting by 2015 was an aim to build an infrastructure of local experts (like school literacy coordinators in the NLS). In instances where providers could use other funding streams to cross-fund or economies of scale to make savings, this was a reasonable ambition. But for small PVIs – especially in poorer areas – the graduate ambition was impossible without the aid of government grants. However, the strategy of government subsidy to private providers was one vulnerable to future cuts.

Just as 'support' had its limits outside the maintained sector, so too did 'challenge'. Professional capacity limited accurate accountability; only one assessment point was introduced in EYFS, to be carried out in schools by a well-trained workforce once children had arrived at school. The minority of settings on school sites were held to account by the test, but other providers were much less accountable for the value they were adding to children's skills. Meanwhile, Ofsted inspections of early years providers matched school inspections in their frequency (once every three to four years); to visit the 16,700 settings more regularly would have been beyond the inspectorate's capacity. In between visits, two or three cohorts of children could complete their entire early years education in a setting; the provision for these children was not adequately quality assured.

By the end of the decade, overall quality had improved, as had staff qualifications; FSP scores had increased and the gap was narrowing. However, early years provision was still of worst quality in PVI settings in poorer areas, with knock-on effects on children's literacy development.

Early Years under the Coalition

A change in the framing the early years sector under the Coalition brought new clarity to the sector's goals but further challenges in eradicating illiteracy amongst the poorest children in the country. During this period, government extended and improved some key aspects of Early Years policy but the sector also suffered significantly from funding cuts. Young families were disproportionately affected by changes in government spending, with half a million more children in absolute poverty by the end of the period. Although overall attainment at age 5 increased over the period, the gap between more and less affluent children grew slightly at the beginning of the parliament, and has not reduced since.

Key Strengths	Tensions & Challenges
How: Access to Quality Early Education	
<p>Funding was protected for entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, signalling that early years remained a priority in times of austerity.</p> <p>An Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) provided extra funding for disadvantaged 3 and 4 year olds and implied a national goal of closing the socio-economic gap.</p>	<p>Take-up of entitlement remained lower in poorer areas. There were indications some councils were struggling to provide sufficient places by 2015.</p> <p>The EYPP was not sufficient funding to balance the effect of cuts in improving quality in settings serving poorer areas.</p>
What: Curriculum & Accountability	
<p>Research on cognitive development led to a reformulation of the EYFS, with a greater focus on personal, social and emotional development, physical development, communication and language underpinning all of children's early learning.</p> <p>The EYFS Progress Check was introduced, creating accountability earlier in the EYFS, making most providers more accountable.</p>	<p>Local authorities' responsibilities were curtailed, potentially reducing the breadth and accuracy of inspection in the sector and limiting frequency to once every four years.</p> <p>The EYFSP became non-statutory following the introduction of a primary school baseline. Sector specialists raised concern that this would narrow pedagogy and damage child development.</p>
Who: Professional Development	
<p>New Early Years professional statuses were developed, with more rigorous qualification criteria. Numbers of graduates in the sector continued to increase. In the first part of the parliament, data showed an increase in staff with qualified to a Level 3 minimum.</p>	<p>Recommendations from the independent workforce review were ignored: level 3 was not made a minimum national qualification and the new Early Years Teacher Status did not have QTS parity. The sector complained of difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff because of the poor pay and conditions.</p> <p>The Graduate Leader Fund was scrapped, the Children's Workforce Development Council was closed, goals for numbers of graduates were abandoned and no alternative workforce development strategy was set out. Cuts to Local Authority funding affected the training and support on offer to the sector.</p>

Reframing the 'New Frontier'

Despite little mention in their electoral campaigns, upon entering office the Coalition parties continued a governmental focus on early years through the commissioning of several prominent independent reviews. In 2010, the Coalition named Frank Field MP a 'Poverty Tsar' and commissioned him to undertake a review on Poverty and Life Chances, with particular focus on the early years. Shortly after, Graham Allen MP was invited to chair a review of Early Intervention; Eileen Munro was commissioned to review child protection; Dame Clare Tickell reviewed the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum; and Professor Cathy Nutbrown reviewed qualifications in the Early Years and Childcare Sector.

The consensus from many of these reports was the importance of early intervention, particularly in reducing the long-term costs of problems inter-related with early poverty. Emphases in the Field Report and the Allen Review influenced government's child poverty and social mobility strategies, both of which stressed the importance moving "away from a narrow focus on income measures" towards targeted provision of services and intervention programmes.²⁸⁷ This re-framing saw children's life chances dictated, not solely by childhood poverty, but by a cluster of factors correlated with poverty. Frank Field's review listed "healthy pregnancy, positive but authoritative parenting, high quality childcare, a positive approach to learning at home and an improvement in parents' qualifications" as indicators of children's later life chances.²⁸⁸

There was a consensus also amongst Allen's and Field's reviews that there should be a shift in resources to the early years, away from child tax credits or secondary school funding if necessary in a time of austerity. However, during this period there were cuts to *both* funding to reduce child poverty and to service provision for vulnerable families. Although education budgets were ring-fenced against austerity, early years funding was not.

Ring-fence protection for Sure Start was removed and different funding streams were consolidated into the Early Intervention Grant, whose value was more than halved over the following five years,²⁸⁹ meaning that councils had to balance maintenance of early years provision and children's services against other social care demands.²⁹⁰ Local government funding was estimated to have fallen by nearly 30% in real terms between 2008 and 2015²⁹¹ with per child funding dropping by a quarter between 2009 and 2013: from £2,508 to £1,867.²⁹² This impacted some areas of the country much more than others; analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that the scrapping or consolidation of different grants affected the most deprived local authorities the most during the period.²⁹³

At the same time, tax benefit reforms hit families with small children much harder than other groups (and those with babies were particularly affected by the withdrawal of benefits during pregnancy and a child's first year).²⁹⁴ This led to a rise in Child Poverty by absolute measures. After a consistent decline towards 2010, relative poverty remained static at approximately 17% of children between 2010 and 2015. However, during this time, incomes fell across the distribution meaning that the bar of relative poverty had been lowered. Against absolute measures, 0.5 million more children fell into absolute poverty during this period²⁹⁵ and the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that the number of children in absolute poverty rise further, from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% in 2020-21.²⁹⁶

Despite an emphasis on broadening measurements of childhood poverty, there was a narrowing of measurements of childhood development during this the period. The Every Child Matters agenda had been a keystone of New Labour's reforms around children and families, broadening goals to promoting children's health, wellbeing, safety, enjoyment and achievement, social inclusion and economic wellbeing. Under the Coalition government, the ECM agenda was relinquished and government discourse focused on children's 'school readiness' as a primary goal of the early years sector.

How: Access to Early Education

Despite a commitment to deficit reduction, the Coalition government protected early years funding in key areas. The free entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds was continued and extended, as planned, from 12.5 hours to 15 hours a week. More flexibility was also introduced into the entitlement, to facilitate employment – particularly for parents with irregular working patterns. The 15 hours could be taken over a minimum of two days, rather than three. While this was more practical in terms of childcare, it potentially reduced their value in helping increase child development outcomes; EPPE had not shown any benefits to longer hours of care.²⁹⁷

Protecting this policy maintained a high level of access for 3 and 4 year olds, with the overall percentage of accessing entitlement rising from 94% in 2011, to 96% by 2013, remaining stable at this level until 2015.²⁹⁸ However, by 2015 there was still variation between areas, with only 90% of parents in more deprived areas taking up their entitlement.²⁹⁹ An NAO investigation into entitlement said that the Department of Education was not clear whether the lack of take-up was related to a lack of provision or lower demand in these areas. However, a series of surveys by the Family and Childcare Trust found that an increasing number of local authorities over the period reported that they did not have enough free early education places.³⁰⁰ These areas with reported fewer places coincided with areas in which take-up was lower corroborating claims of under-supply.

In 2015, it was announced that the Pupil Premium, extra funding for disadvantaged pupils at primary and secondary school, would be extended to deprived three and four year olds taking up their entitlement. The Childcare Minister described the purpose of the new Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) as “helping the most disadvantaged children access high-quality early education, giving them the best start in life.”³⁰¹ Since its introduction in 2011, Pupil Premium funding had been weighted towards younger children; by 2015 primary schools were receiving £1,320 per child (from Reception to the end of KS2), while secondary schools were receiving £935 per child (from KS2 to the end of KS4). The concentration of poverty in a local area meant these schools received a sizeable amount of funding from this per pupil grant. However, when the EYPP was announced, it reversed the trend of weighting towards younger children and was set at £300 per child. The new funding, as with PP in primary and secondary schools, was a mechanism of accountability, with settings having to explain to Ofsted how the funding had been spent to raise quality of provision for disadvantaged children. However, ratio restrictions meant the majority of settings were small and so this funding remained a very small contribution to providers' income, not necessarily enough to fund upskilling of staff in a way which would affect quality.³⁰²

The government's consultation document made clear that the EYPP, like the PP, was an accountability tool as well as a source of extra funding; a method of aligning setting's goals with a national drive to close the socio-economic gap. Ofsted will scrutinise setting's spending of EYPP and a setting's leadership and management judgement will be affected by the evidence they provide about interventions to close the gap for disadvantaged children. Government also discussed in their consultation a desire to introduce Unique Pupil Numbers before a child reaches school, so that children could be tracked from their early years provider to age 5, when they are assessed. The EYPP was introduced from April 2015, just before the general election; its impact as a funding stream, and as an accountability mechanism, will be seen over the following parliament.

Sure Start: Access to Integrated Services

In the context of commitment to reducing the deficit, the Coalition government emphasised that funds for state services must be used more effectively and efficiently, to ensure maximum benefit for those in most need. Key to this was a reformulation of the role of Sure Start from a progressively universal service to a targeted one. Evaluation studies had consistently shown that more work was needed for Sure Start to engage 'hard to reach' families.³⁰³ Upon election, the Coalition Government pledged to 'take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention' and 'increase its focus on the neediest families' to support their children's readiness for school.³⁰⁴

To encourage a refocusing on those most in need, government experimented with the idea of Payment by Results (PbR). The Field Review suggested incentivising Sure Start centres to target services and increasing their efficiency by focusing on outcomes. From September 2011, an 18 month trial took place in 27 Local Authorities with varied outcome measurements including attendance at parenting programmes, prevalence of early breastfeeding and take-up of entitlement amongst disadvantaged groups.³⁰⁵ However, following an unfavourable independent evaluation, the policy was dropped. Authors found no effects of PbR and concluded that the payments on offer were too small to make a difference to practice.³⁰⁶

The Sure Start programme had historically lacked clarity of role and measurable outcomes from its beginnings in 1998, and this lack of definition left it vulnerable to cuts. Whereas government committed spending to family support in policies such as the Health Visitor programme, sources of funding for children's centres diminished – Sure Start funding in council budgets was no longer ring-fenced, and the Early Intervention Grant was ended. The total number of Sure Start sites fell from 3,631 to 3,019 between 2010 and 2014, although mergers of centres meant that government held the loss at only 72 centres across the country.³⁰⁷ There was significant local variation in closures of Sure Start centres; with some LAs protecting the services more than others.

The reformulation of Sure Start Children's Centres also changed their role in providing affordable childcare in the poorest parts of the country. Centres in the 30% most deprived areas previously had a statutory duty to provide a minimum of 10 hours a day childcare on site. In 2010 this was removed. Between 2010 and 2013, the proportion of children's centres offering full day care fell from 25% to only 15% of centres.³⁰⁸ There had also been a statutory duty on children's centres to employ a graduate with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or an early years qualification, this too was dropped in 2010. Whereas in 2011, 72% of Sure Start Children's Centres working with 3 and 4 year

olds had staff with QTS/EYPS/EYTS (early years teacher status), by 2013 this had dropped to 68%. Of providers linked to Children’s Centres, these proportions were 36% in 2011, falling to 27% in 2013.³⁰⁹

What: Curriculum & Accountability

The Early Years Curriculum

In 2011, Dame Clare Tickell published her independent review of the EYFS, commissioned under the previous government.³¹⁰ The report included 46 recommendations, including slimming down of the EYFS goals - for ease of accessibility by parents and practitioners, and distinguishing between ‘prime’ and ‘specific’ areas of learning – incorporated into an updated assessment, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). A particularly important recommendation was for all practitioners to provide “a short summary of their child’s communication and language, personal, social and emotional, and physical development between the age of 24-36 months... ideally... shared with health visitors”.³¹¹ From September 2012, an updated EYFS was implemented taking on many of Tickell’s recommendations and the new Progress Check was born.

Prime and Specific Areas of Learning

The new EYFS distinguished between ‘prime areas’ and ‘specific areas’ of learning. **Prime areas** are foundational bedrocks for the rest of learning in EYFS: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. Learning in these key areas is what neuroscientists call ‘experience expectant’; natural brain adaptation to stimulation in the environment around a child, particularly during ‘sensitive periods’ in brain development.³¹² For instance, an understanding of language happens naturally through a child’s exposure to language; but if this exposure does not happen during a key period, the capacity to learn is capped. These prime areas are therefore time-sensitive and must be secure by age 5 if children are to progress normally from then on. They also are non-specific and can therefore be embedded throughout the interactions, environment and activities through which the EYFS curriculum is delivered. Tickell’s review sought to highlight the primacy of these areas and the need for each of them to be consistently woven into EYFS delivery.

The **specific areas** of learning are what neuroscientists term ‘experience dependent’. Unlike prime areas, these are not automatic brain adaptations to stimuli: learning in these areas will only occur if it is explicitly modelled and taught and if cultural context demands these skills to be exhibited. However, skills developed in these areas are less time sensitive – learning to read and write, for instance, can happen at many different stages in life – though they are dependent on prime skills (children cannot learn to read and write if they do not know any language).

The new EYFS separated Communication, Language and Literacy into two discrete areas: the former two making up prime areas and the latter, a specific area. This reformulating of the curriculum made explicit the mechanisms of children’s learning in the different areas, and also drew attention to the foundational importance of prime areas in underpinning development in specific areas.

The EYFS had unified a disparate sector and given a common assessment structure. However, there were concerns that the revised framework would open the possibility of re-fragmentation through increased scope for exemption from the curriculum. Under New Labour, legislation had permitted exemption from the learning and development requirements of the EYFS for those schools

“governed by established principles” which were incompatible with the EYFS, such as Steiner schools. However, the 2012 update to the EYFS framework opened a new ‘route’ to exemption for “good quality independent schools” catering to children aged 3 and above and also simplified the process so that, rather than consult with Local Authorities, providers intending to exempt themselves need only notify the LA.³¹³ Despite concerns, a Parliamentary Question revealed that by 2014 only 44 providers had applied for full or partial exemptions under the new legislation and only 10 of these were independent providers.³¹⁴

The reformed curriculum included new scope for accountability in the Progress Check. The Check required practitioners to review a child’s development in the three prime areas of the EYFS. This was an important point to share information between parents, practitioners and health workers and, where children were found not to be progressing as expected, an opportunity to plan a set of interventions in the setting and at home. Plans for the check emphasised collaboration with parents in the assessment process; practitioners were to support parents in identifying strengths and learning priorities for their child going forward. Practitioners were expected to keep ongoing notes on assessment and progress against EYFS, including photographs which evidenced children’s skill. The Progress Check was an opportunity for this data to be consolidated into short written feedback on the three prime areas, to be shared with parents when the child was between 2 and 2 ½.

While the Progress Check was being rolled out across the country, five local authorities implemented a pilot of an integrated review, combining Progress Check with the Healthy Child Programme health and development review.³¹⁵ This integrated review sought to identify strengths and needs across health, wellbeing, learning and behaviour; to facilitate coordinated intervention and support for those children in need of it; and to generate information to aid the planning of services towards closing the attainment gap between more and less deprived children.³¹⁶ Following the trial, it was rolled out across local authorities from September 2015. Further analysis is provided in the chapter on infant and family services.

The Progress Check offered scope for accountability earlier in a child’s learning journey, bringing more scrutiny to the work of PVI providers and those not attached to schools (those in schools were already more accountable through the EYFSP). The Progress Check introduced a level of consistency and increased rigour across the sector in using the EYFS and tracking progress against it. It not only encouraged more early intervention and accountability to parents, it also created a data point which could be used to hold settings to account through inspections.

However, just as this step forward in accountability age 2 ½ was being taken, there was what many felt to be a step backwards in accountability at age 5. In 2013, the DfE consulted on reforms to assessment and accountability of primary schools, suggesting a new optional baseline test to be introduced in reception year, when children were 5, to replace EYFSP. This would match up to skills in KS1 and KS2 SATS, to allow progress through primary school to be more accurately measured.³¹⁷ However, primarily designed to hold primary schools to account, baseline proposals described a test more focused on the two ‘specific areas’ of literacy and numeracy than on capturing the range of development and learning which had taken place in the Foundation Stage. There was therefore much criticism from both the early years and the primary sector that this would drive a narrowing of the early years curriculum, potentially adversely affecting children’s development.

Unlike the EYFSP or other national tests in primary, government commissioned private exam boards to create baseline assessments, giving schools the options to choose their preferred baseline. A process began in which schools would select their favoured assessments from six accredited baseline providers, each of which must recruit a minimum of 10% of primary schools by the end of April 2015 in order to still be an eligible provider. Two prominent professional development organisations, TACTYC and Early Education, undertook a review the six accredited assessments and how these mapped against principles of EYFS. They found only one of the six covered fully the three prime and four specific areas of learning, as well as using practitioner observation in assessment.³¹⁸ These two organisations launched a campaign against the baseline in 2014, which gathered steam over the final year over the parliament, arguing that the proposal “distorts the early years curriculum and detracts from the rich, explorative, playful and intellectual experiences which research shows benefit children in the early years”.³¹⁹

Despite concerns from those in the sector, the one baseline most like the EYFSP, made by Early Education, was the most popular choice amongst primary schools.³²⁰ As the baseline was optional, some headteachers refused to use it altogether, preferring to continue to be held to account by their attainment data rather than their progress data.³²¹ However, as the EYFSP also became non-statutory it was a real concern by the end of the parliament that schools could be using many different methods to assess children in their reception year. This would challenge the ability to gauge learning success in the Foundation Stage, the efficacy of innovations such as the EYPP and progress towards closing the literacy gap between the most and least affluent children across the country.

The reduction in this gap had actually stalled across the parliament. Although it had been rapidly reducing since the FSP had been introduced in 2006, in the Coalition’s term in office it has remained stagnant, fluctuating between 18 and 19 percentage points. Although there were overall improvements in attainment, these were at the same rate for both children from poorer and more affluent homes. Large regional disparity in socio-economic gaps were clear in Ofsted’s 2015 report. Whilst some Local Authorities had similar percentages of FSM children attaining a GLD to the national average (all in inner-city London), others were achieving less than half the average with their deprived cohorts.³²²

Table 2.4: Percentage of children achieving a ‘good’ level of development: FSM and all other pupils 2010-15³²³

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13*	2013-14	2014-15
FSM pupils	43.7	48.2	36.2*	44.8	51**
All other pupils	62.1	67.0	55.2*	63.7	69**
Gap (percentage points)	18.4	18.8	19.0	18.9	18**

*(FSP changed to the EYFSP in 2012, meaning that results in 2011/12 and 2012/13 are not directly comparable)

** - this latest data was from a second source and was already rounded to the nearest whole number

Accountability

Until 2013, Local Authorities had a duty to improve quality locally and in doing so undertook inspections. From 2013, this duty was restricted to commissioning early years providers based solely on Ofsted grades of settings, and LA’s inspection powers were withdrawn, making Ofsted the sole accountability mechanism for quality of early years provision.³²⁴ This was intended to reduce

duplication of labour and confusion for early years providers. However it was not without controversy. Ofsted had already been critiqued before this change for its reliability in measuring the quality of early years pedagogy, the regularity of its inspection, and for inadvertently driving a 'schoolification' of early years which critics said would undermine the quality of children's early learning.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) and the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) are the most widely used international metrics of 'process quality' – the emotional and pedagogical quality of actions and interactions between children, staff, the environment and other children in a setting catering to children 0-2 and 3-5 respectively.³²⁵ These were the quality measurements used by the academics of EPPE in investigating the long-term effects of quality pre-school, which found them to be important predictors of children's development and literacy skills. In 2012, Oxford Academics and leading charity the DayCare Trust undertook a study into the correlation between ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted ratings.³²⁶ They found broad alignment but weak correlation between the two measures. This echoed a 2010 report for the Office of National Statistics which showed Ofsted scores for early years settings did not predict children's later outcomes.³²⁷ Commentary by the Oxford academics pointed out that this did not mean Ofsted ratings were redundant; Ofsted sought to capture statutory compliance as well as delivery of the EYFS, so had an important regulatory role. However, they used their report to argue that Ofsted inspections alone were not able to provide a "complete and accurate measure of quality" in early years pedagogy and practice.³²⁸

A year later, a separate group of LSE academics found that the presence of graduates (which EPPE linked to setting quality) was positively correlated with positive Ofsted ratings. However the authors pointed out that while the concentration of graduates captures 'input' to the quality process in early years "Ofsted ratings... capture the resulting output, which is likely to reflect not only current regulatory framework but also settings' resources and their intake".³²⁹ For this reason, the authors raised concerns over the Coalition's decision to use Ofsted ratings as the only indicator of quality (removing Local Authorities' ability to inspect), which they felt would penalise PVIs serving the most disadvantaged children, who were likely to have fewer resources and an intake of children with poorer development on entry.

Accuracy of Ofsted ratings were also undermined by the frequency of inspections. Early years inspections matched schools' in their frequency (once every three to four years). However in this period two or three cohorts of children could complete their entire early years education: meaning that a rapid deterioration of quality and safety (say, from a change of staff in a small ratio context) could have a substantial effect on children in a short time, with no mechanism to quickly detect such a change. Despite these and other criticisms from sector academics for the more regular and detailed inspections carried out by Local Authorities to continue, in 2013 government legislation removed this duty on LAs.

At the time of this decision, the early years education charity Pre-School Learning Alliance were vociferous champions of a drive to improve Ofsted inspection quality. Since 2010, Ofsted had been out-sourcing inspection of the early years, and the charity attributed this to a "steady decline in the quality of inspections".³³⁰ In 2013-14, two thirds of all formal complaints made against Ofsted were

filed by early years providers.³³¹ According to Alliance reports, providers described inspections carried out by inspectors who were not early years specialists.³³²

These tensions between the inspectorate and the sector were further exacerbated in 2014, when the head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, wrote a letter to early years inspectors instructing them to focus on settings' teaching of 'the early stages of mathematics and reading'.³³³ This prompted an outcry from early years academics who construed it as Ofsted ignoring the cognitive science underpinning the prominence of 'prime areas' in the EYFS and the research-led emphasis of learning through play. Critics accused the edict of encouraging the 'schoolification' of the early years; 250 educationalists wrote an open letter to the Department for Education in the Telegraph, calling for the Department and Ofsted to "step back from this misguided drive to over-formalise England's early-years sphere".³³⁴ However, the new Common Inspection Framework, launched in 2015, and Ofsted's second Early Years report both sought to clarify that the inspectorate did not take a view on pedagogy.

By Ofsted's measurements, the quality of the sector did improve over the Coalition's time in government. Whereas in 2009/10 68% of providers were Good or Outstanding, by 2015 85% of providers were Good or Outstanding.³³⁵

Over the Coalition period, there were significant contradictions in both accountability and curriculum policy. Although the Progress Check further standardised assessment across providers and offered greater scope for accountability to parents and government, the removal of Local Authority inspections was seen as a threat to accurate accountability. Reforms to the EYFS sought to raise quality of pedagogy by emphasising the foundations of children's learning: their physical development; personal, social, emotional development; and their communication and language. Yet at the same time, Ofsted rhetoric and the replacement of EYFSP with the baseline test indicated that these things were valued less than explicit 'school readiness' skills of literacy and numeracy.

Who: Professional Development

As well as recommending changes to the EYFS curriculum, Dame Tickell's 2011 Review also commented on the early years workforce. Echoing criticisms made 10 years earlier of the Labour government's qualification requirements, Tickell argued that qualification minimums should to be more ambitious. EPPE and NNI research had already shown that higher qualified staff were crucial in raising setting quality. Tickell recommended a target of a universal minimum Level 3 qualification, including for childminders. She also called for the new Coalition government to maintain the national ambition for a graduate-led workforce. Tickell responded to sector concerns that early years qualifications lacked rigour and were not necessarily transmitting the most up to date evidence on children's learning. She recommended an independent review into qualifications for the workforce, which was carried out over the following year by Professor Cathy Nutbrown.

The Nutbrown review was published in 2012 and argued that a clear career pathway in early years ought to be developed. Professor Nutbrown called for greater clarity over entry routes to the profession, continued commitment to upskill those already working in the sector and incentives for new recruits. She suggested a hierarchy of job titles, with qualifications to match each stage in an early years career and pay progression accordingly. The Early Years Professional (EYP) qualification

did not have parity of esteem, pay or portability with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) so Nutbrown recommended the creation of a new Early Years Teacher role, which would be QTS-equivalent. This role would be senior to the previous EYP role and achieved through an early years specialism Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE). While an EYP would lead practice and manage a setting, an Early Years Teacher would be able to provide “overall pedagogical leadership” and to train other staff.³³⁶ At the opposite end of the qualifications spectrum, she argued for “raise[d] expectation[s] of practitioners’ literacy and mathematical abilities”³³⁷ for instance by requiring students have a Level 2 in English and maths before completing a Level 3 qualification. Nutbrown agreed with Tickell that a Level 2 qualification was insufficient training for a staff member providing education rather than just childcare; she too called for a shift in expectations, with staff in the sector trained in a staged process, so that by 2022, Level 3 would be the minimum workforce qualification.

The government responded in 2013 with the announcement of two new highly qualified Early Years roles, but fell short of meeting Nutbrown’s recommendations in full. A new Early Years Teachers (EYT) role was created, which would be gained through an ITT course with a specialism in early childhood development.³³⁸ Trainees would “meet the same entry requirements and pass the same skills tests as trainee school teachers”.³³⁹ However, rather than EYPs being able to work towards this new qualification in a structured career, the government described the EYT role as “building on the success of Early Years Professionals”. Like the EYPs, the EYT role did not have QTS equivalence; instead they would be granted a new Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS). Their ITT could not award them a full PGCE.³⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the Early Years Educator (EYE) role would be a new Level 3 status, awarded to “only the best qualifications, which meet rigorous criteria set out by the teaching agency”. Focusing on Nutbrown’s recommendations about literacy and mathematical abilities, the EYE role would only be open to those who had gained at least a C grade in GCSE English and maths.³⁴¹ However, GCSE equivalents – Level 2 qualifications held by much of the sector – were not valid for EYE status. The goal of working towards a Level 3 qualification minimum across the sector was not set. The previous goal of a graduate-level role in every setting was also phased out.

EYTs were not included in the recent trainee number census for ITT, so it is hard to estimate how many have taken up this new route. However, the statistics on early years provision for children under 5 years old show the proportion of providers delivering entitlement with QTS/QYTS/EYPS increasing incrementally. Over the five years of Coalition government the proportion grew from 38% of non-childminder entitlement providers in 2011 to 49% in 2015.³⁴² Data on the qualifications of staff across the workforce are published as part of the Childcare and early years providers survey, a statistical release published every two years by the government. The survey covering the year 2012/13 was published in September 2014 but no further releases have been published or been scheduled to be published for 2016. Latest data shows that qualifications at all levels continued to rise during the first part of the Coalition parliament.

Highest level of relevant qualification for all paid staff (group based providers), in percentage terms

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013
No qualification	8	6	6	6	4
Level 1 minimum	90	93	92	93	94
Level 2 minimum	89	92	92	92	93
Level 3 minimum	75	82	81	84	87
Level 5 minimum	7	11	13	17	20

Level 6 minimum	5	7	8	11	13
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Although the qualifications trajectory has remained positive, there were concerns from the sector that pay and conditions were causing challenges in recruitment and retention. Childcare workers remained poorly paid compared to other sectors, and increasingly so over the period. The Low Pay Commission in 2014 found that private nursery staff were increasingly being paid at no higher than the National Minimum Wage; the proportion of staff at this rate rising from 69% in 2008 to 84% by 2013.³⁴³ A survey by the National Day Nurseries Association Workforce found that half their member nurseries were struggling to fill vacancies and reported staff leaving to take better paid jobs, including in supermarkets.³⁴⁴ The report found that shortfalls in the funding rate for entitlement for 2, 3 and 4 year olds was a factor in low wages. Funding challenges in disadvantaged areas was exacerbated by the loss of funding from the Graduate Leader Fund, which was discontinued in 2011.

SLCN Training

In 2011, government funded a programme designed specifically to upskill the sector’s understanding of SLCN needs. Communication charity I CAN was commissioned to develop a training programme – Early Language Development Programme (ELDP) for 1,157 lead practitioners in early years settings. A cascade model saw this training delivered by the lead practitioners to early year practitioner colleagues and for this training to support a total of 150,000 parents over the four years of the programme. The programme was qualitatively evaluated by the Office for Public Management and data on the reach of the training programme revealed a larger number of settings and families were affected by the training programme than originally planned. However, programme funding was discontinued in March 2015.

Details of NDNA Champions to be included in this box: NDNA to provide reference

In Summary

Over almost two decades, the percentage of children able to read well age 11 leapt from 67% in 1997 to 89% by 2015 (80% at the new ‘good’ measurement). Yet in 2015, only 66% of children aged 5 were reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD). For poorer children, just under half were failing to reach a good level of development aged 5 – 48,578 children. Of the 17 learning areas in the EYFS, the gap between poorer and more affluent children was biggest in reading and writing, which stood at 18 and 17 percentage points respectively. Outcomes and inequality in the early years sector at the end of the Coalition parliament were in many ways similar to that of primary schools in 1997. Many lessons from the latter sector can be learnt in the former.

The early stage of development in primary was characterised by ‘high challenge’ - with a national commitment to improved outcomes and sector quality through strong accountability towards national, local and school-level goals. In the Early Years there has not been the same clarity of purpose and rigour of accountability, despite government funding much of the sector. Whilst there have been initiatives and policies aiming to improve attainment and setting quality, a unifying set of national goals has been lacking, as has a coherent strategy to meet them. Worryingly, changes in assessment could see this frustrated further, if schools do not use comparable measures of children’s achievements.

The progress in primary outcomes was also underpinned by the ‘high support’ of the expert-planned materials to up-skill the sector, and investment in professional development and network-building. In early years, the EYFS has been an important step towards increased quality. Yet the infrastructures which effectively cascaded best practice during the NLS and which bring impressive improvement to student outcomes in the most successful MATs is missing in the early years sector. Meanwhile, the professional development which underpinned primary pedagogy dissemination – the career ladder of ‘local experts’ in literacy, placed in schools and local authorities; and the crucial funding which paid for more training and better staffing – is underfunded in the early years sector, threatening its ongoing development. Ways of economising through collaboration and scale need to be developed, if more children are to have graduates planning their curriculum in the poorest parts of the country. Meanwhile, robust infrastructures to share professional knowledge and to drive regular and rigorous accountability must be developed.

Looking forward to 2020

The strengths of previous Early Years policy were in making access for years 3-4 almost universal; extending government regulation to its quality; and developing knowledge of best practice. To shift a gear in early years' communication, language and literacy outcomes, we need to learn lessons from success in primary policy. A step change in early years outcomes requires clear goals; a strategy for professional development, with intervention proportionate to setting quality; and stronger accountability across the sector. As of yet, there have not been moves towards any of these aims.

The challenge over the next parliament will be increasing quality of provision, particularly in the PVI sector, whilst settings struggle to cope with longer entitlement hours, increased staffing costs and reduced professional development from local government.

Access to Quality

After the 2015 General Election, the Conservative party announced they would double entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds to 30 hours a week for parents where both parents living with the child work earn a minimum of 16 hours at the National Minimum Wage each.ⁿ³⁴⁵ The motivation of this policy has been about increasing parents' ability to work, rather than children's development; EPPE research showed that there was no benefit to longer hours of childcare on children's outcomes.³⁴⁶

A 2016 NAO report detailed variation in take-up of the current entitlement to 15 hours, by areas deprivation, with only 90% of parents taking up entitlement compared with 94% of 3 year olds and 99% of 4 year olds nationally. They recorded that "the Department does not know if this is caused by lack of provision or lower demand".³⁴⁷ Research by the Family & Childcare Trust has suggested there is an increasing lack of provision, with more Local Authorities reporting insufficient places for 15 hours' entitlement in 2016 compared to 2015. This matches take-up; in local authorities where enough places are reported the average is 94.5%, compared to 91.9% in areas which LAs say lack sufficient places.³⁴⁸

Following a consultation on childcare costs, to help deliver extended entitlement, the government committed to increasing the per hour entitlement funding by at least 30p, changing the average national rate for 3 and 4 year olds from \$4.56 to £4.88 per hour and the national rate for two year olds from £5.09 to £5.39 per hour. However, per child funding has not risen in line with inflation since 2013-14, meaning that settings have faces real term cuts over the past 3 years.³⁴⁹ Therefore, the uplift in funding will not necessarily substantially impact the quality providers are able to deliver. This is particularly the case as it may not all reach the frontline. Funding is currently top-sliced by the local authority (at an average of 10%, although this differs across local authorities);³⁵⁰ an aspect of early years spending which was not factored into the funding increase.

The NAO have said that the funding rates are based on "the Department's own assumption that large numbers of providers can become more efficient".³⁵¹ However, research on the affordability of the current entitlement found that providers rely on cross-subsidisation from expensive care of children under 2, as well as "the goodwill of volunteers and on lower-paid workers who have a sense

ⁿ Exceptions to this include families in receipt of benefits related to caring responsibilities or disability.

of vocation about providing childcare”.³⁵² It is not certain, therefore, that providers will be able to be more efficient when providing increased entitlement hours, (which reduces the number of hours parents will pay for). The NAO findings point to providers cutting the number of places they offer under entitlement, so they can maintain the requisite number of paid places for younger children, to allow cross-subsidy – a threat to access, particularly in the poorer areas where parents are least likely to pay for care for children under 3. This could mean that the poorest families will be squeezed out of childcare. Another potential outcome is providers relying more on under-qualified volunteers and poorly paid staff, thus lowering the quality of provision. As cross-subsidy constraints are worse in poorer areas, we can expect that this, too, would be more likely in poorer areas.

There are early indications that there may not be sufficient places to fulfil the commitment for 30 entitlement hours. A survey of 500 PVI nurseries by the National Day Nursery Association (NDNA) found that fewer than half said they were likely to offer the 30 hour funded childcare places.³⁵³ Those who said they were unsure or unlikely to offer the places cited inadequate funding and space.³⁵⁴ The NDNA has raised the issue of the increased minimum wage in pushing up costs for providers, estimating it to push up setting’s payrolls by 10%. This further financial strain may also affect access to places and quality. The CEO of the NDNA has called for flexibility in how the expansion is delivered. She said in March 2016 that “52% of parents are telling us they would rather have fewer hours all year round rather than term-time only. Most people’s jobs are not term-time only and such a move could help nurseries to create more places more efficiently.”³⁵⁵ From September 2016, 8 Local Authorities^o will pilot the 30 funded hours and their pathfinder experiences will be used to support expansion from 2017.³⁵⁶

Plans were also announced for a national funding formula for early years in 2017-18, to address historical inequalities in national funding levels. There will be a consultation in early 2017 on this. The NDNA have called for LA top-slicing to be fixed at a minimal national rate and for early education funding to be ring-fenced.³⁵⁷

Recently, the Economy Committee of the London Assembly has written to the Secretary of State with concerns about whether funding changes are sufficient to cover the cost of 30 entitlement hours in London. Owing partly to larger building costs and a higher minimum wage, early years provision is more costly in London. The Economy Committee called for more capital funding to help schools establish nurseries to meet demand for new places.³⁵⁸ However, there have been questions raised over whether the 2016 white paper will reduce the number of maintained places at the moment as legislation does not currently allow nurseries to become academies.³⁵⁹ This change in legislation, if it happens, would create scope for more PVIs to join MATs and an avenue for increased opportunities for professional development in the sector and accountability for outcomes.

Curriculum & Accountability

Stronger accountability, as under the standards agenda in schooling, to raise motivation and to target spending to strategies which will yield improved outcomes for children. EYFS data is not routinely linked to the early years settings which children attended. Introducing Unique Pupil Numbers when children begin their entitlement would create scope for better accountability in the

^o Wigan, Staffordshire, Swindon, Portsmouth, Northumberland, York, Newham & Hertfordshire

future. However, potential moves to make EYFSP non-compulsory poses a challenge in holding settings to account; the narrower measures of some baseline tests may not adequately capture setting quality.

There is a question mark over ongoing accountability for early years outcomes, with two recent controversial policies being postponed and with ongoing ambiguity about their future. In Summer 2016, before the EU referendum and Prime Minister Theresa May's re-shuffle, it was announced that baseline testing would not be rolled out, as test results from the three chosen providers could not easily be compared.³⁶⁰ A few months later, under the newly shuffled-in Secretary of State, Justine Greening, it was confirmed that the EYFSP would not become non-statutory as planned, at least for the next academic year. It is now not unclear whether EYFSP will become non-statutory in the future, whether one single baseline test will be developed for future use or whether neither of these things will happen. It will be crucial for addressing illiteracy that a national metric is maintained.

A positive move in holding settings to account has been the announcement that Ofsted inspections are to be brought in-house again from April 2017.³⁶¹ It is thought that this could increase the quality assurance of inspections, following concerns about the training and accuracy of inspectors in early years. However, there are still sector criticisms of the regularity of inspections and the level of depth, compared to the previous visits which Local Authorities had a statutory duty to carry out. This, alongside the duty of LAs to offer support to all settings (rather than just those which are 'Requires Improvement' according to Ofsted), was a legislative change in 2013. This will also mean a 4 year lag in seeing the impact of these changes and a wider reduction of support to improve quality (in cuts to dedicated grants and to more general council funding) on setting quality.

Qualifications and Professional Development

The ROGO coalition is working with the early years sector and parents to campaign for investment in the early years workforce and a national focus on childcare quality. A strategy for professional development must be created, with funding to support settings in the poorest areas upskill their staff and improve quality.

Challenges to improving staff quality in early years include the rising costs of qualifications, set against bigger profitability challenges for PVI's, especially those in poorer areas.³⁶² Counter-intuitively, raised qualification requirements may also be acting as a barrier, resulting in lowered qualifications across the sector. The new Early Years Educator (Level 3) role requires practitioners to have GCSE maths and English at a C grade or above. The NDNA reports that its members find this requirement is exacerbating the challenge to recruit staff and apprentices, leading to increasing numbers of poorer paid Level 2 staff being hired.³⁶³ A sensible adjustment could be to allow GCSE equivalents to count in the EYE requirements and to create a fund to help PVI's and childminders fund Level 3 qualifications.

Many PVI's report challenges in recruitment and retention, given the persistent low pay and status of the early years sector. Per child funding will need to be raised further if this problem is not to get worse through the parliament.

As with the early days of the NLS, intervention to improve quality should be progressive according to need. However, contrary to the NLS, the infrastructure and governing style of top-down, centralised policymaking, cascaded through local government, is gone. Policy change happens on a local level, through smaller networks of institutions. In this context, local authorities may not remain the most appropriate mechanism for workforce development and setting improvement. As with the Teaching School Alliance model, primary schools working with their local PVI providers, with grants from central government according to level of need (estimated from local EYFS outcomes) may be a fruitful evolution of policy. However, the NDNA, which calls for more nurseries to work with schools, reports that fewer nurseries are working with schools (38% in 2016, compared to 43% in 2015).³⁶⁴ Research ought to be carried out to explore how this maps onto areas of deprivation and how relationships between schools and nurseries can be facilitated and incentivised, particularly in areas where there is persistent low quality of provision.

A network accountability model, where 'hub' primary schools are funded to improve the outcomes of 'spoke' PVI providers in the local area is one option for spreading accountability through schools to all PVI settings. Requiring PVI providers to be linked to a school for their ongoing training needs, and holding schools to account for improving EYFS outcomes could be a policy route to improving quality. However, as with the Teaching School Alliance model, this must be adequately funded – with staff time costed – in order to be achievable. Creating a QTS role in early years management to run this type of network from within a school could provide the capacity needed at the same time as creating a clearer career structure within the profession, to attract well qualified entrants to the sector and incentivise professional development.

A strategy for quality improvement must be adequately funded; outcomes will not improve indefinitely in early years without substantial government commitment and investment.

Child and Family Services

Child and Family Services under New Labour

The importance of early attachment and stimulation shaped government commitment to supporting families. By the end of the period, more mothers were able to take maternity leave and to access early education and care. However, despite research showing that poorer infants had most to gain, by 2010 both of these opportunities remained heavily determined by family income.

Key Strengths	Tensions & Challenges
Parenting Policy	
<p>Maternal employment rights and paid leave were both extended, leading to a dramatic increase in working mothers spending the first 6-12 months of their infant's life caring for them.</p> <p>Expanding the roles of health visitors demonstrated investment towards universal parenting support. Targeted support through the Family Nurse Partnership and Sure Start both showed positive effects on literacy levels, especially for disadvantaged subgroups.</p>	<p>At the end of Labour's third term, poorer families were still less likely to take full maternity leave, or to understand their access to support towards the cost of childcare.</p> <p>Despite longitudinal evidence of positive impact on parenting behaviours, an initial review of Sure Start showed poor short-term outcomes for vulnerable mothers and their children. This led to a shift in focus away from parenting work towards early education, reducing more universal access to parenting support.</p>
Health Policy	
<p>NHS targets and positive trends in social attitude contributed to improvements in maternal health behaviours linked to cognitive and linguistic development – breastfeeding, smoking cessation and avoiding alcohol during pregnancy.</p> <p>Speech and language therapy (SLT) was integrated into Sure Start Children's Centres, helping to re-frame SLCN as a public health issue rather than an individualised medical problem and focusing on prevention rather than treatment.</p>	<p>Targeted interventions working with the most vulnerable women helped reduce immediate crises and improved child protection, but health behaviours in this hard-to-reach group didn't change, suggesting a need for further research.</p> <p>Reviews of SLCN policy found that Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) were not always prioritising preventative work, focusing instead on acute need. By the end of the decade, Family Nurse shortages exacerbated the challenge of delivering universal services, especially in deprived areas.</p>
Education Policy	
<p>Access to early pre-care more than doubled over the New Labour period. Recognising its importance for addressing the link between poverty and outcomes, free entitlement was piloted for disadvantaged 2 year olds.</p> <p>Qualifications of providers of care for children aged 0-2 rose along with the rest of the sector and children's centres began to create an infrastructure of professional development.</p>	<p>Poorer families remained much less likely to take up early education by the end of the decade. Even within the targeted pilot of entitlement for 2 year olds, there was low take-up. More research about barriers and incentives in poorer communities was needed.</p> <p>Quality in the pre-3 sector lagged behind settings offering the entitlement and was exacerbated by local deprivation. Meanwhile, the national workforce development strategy did not include childminders, a key part of the 0-2 education and care sector.</p>

Parenting Policy

The 1998 document *Supporting Families* was the first time government had consulted on the topic of families.³⁶⁵ Previously family life had been perceived as beyond the purview of government. In this consultation, the New Labour government outlined five areas where government could make a difference: improving family prosperity; making it easier for parents to spend time with children; providing access to parenting advice and support; reducing risks of family break-down; and tackling family-related problems including domestic violence and teenage pregnancy. Each of these areas had strong proven links with child development, and later literacy levels.

Parenting, attachment and literacy

Parenting style is the “single largest domain explaining the poorer cognitive performance of low-income children relative to middle-income children”.³⁶⁶ Research has estimated that more than a fifth of the pre-school literacy gap can be explained by parenting style, including maternal sensitivity and responsiveness.³⁶⁷ This parental sensitivity and responsiveness in the early years is what leads to ‘secure attachment’.

Attachment is developed from birth. Consistent comfort and caregiving provides a ‘secure base’ from which infants can explore the world around them, learn and develop.³⁶⁸ Between a third and half of children, however, are insecurely attached to some degree.³⁶⁹ Varied early parenting experiences, including disruption to the consistent of care; the ignoring of a baby’s needs; or a harsh or aggressive response to needs being expressed, can all contribute to this insecure attachment. This early life experience shapes a growing infant’s ability to regulate their own feelings, relate to others and learn from the world around them.

Large scale reviews have shown the links between early attachment and language development at age 3;³⁷⁰ even when controlling for other risks including poverty, single parenthood and maternal depression.³⁷¹ Studies have shown how sensitive parent-child interactions and secure attachments are linked to the development of executive functions of the brain: working memory, mental flexibility and self-control.³⁷² It is thought that this is a causal mechanism which explains the relationship between attachment and language development.

Despite ‘what parents do’ being more statistically significant than ‘who parents are’,³⁷³ poverty is a potent risk factor in positive parenting behaviour and healthy attachment. Low household income increases the likelihood of mental illness, physical illness and family instability – all of which can affect parents’ abilities to provide continuity of care and to respond to infants’ needs sensitively.³⁷⁴ Access to maternal leave and quality early childcare are also crucial factors the development of healthy attachment, shaped by household income.

Parental Leave

A key policy to boost both the time parents could spend with children and the incomes of young families, was the increased right to parental leave.

The importance of attachment and the benefits of breastfeeding in scaffolding this early attachment (as well as physical health benefits) mean that a mother is an ideal primary carer in the first six-twelve months of an infant’s life.³⁷⁵ Yet when Labour took office, it was a challenge for mothers to

provide this early care without leaving the labour market. Until 1993, employment rights in this regard had varied from employer to employer and were linked to length of service; many women were unable to take maternal leave without losing their jobs. The 1998 Cross-Departmental Review of Provision for Young Children showed that maternal employment was related to childhood poverty amongst young families and that long-term child development was significantly affected by early experiences of poverty.³⁷⁶ The 1999 Employment Relations Act extended rights to maternity leave from 18 weeks to a full year after which women had protection to return to a similar job. This was intended to allow mothers to take leave, whilst also staying connected to the labour market, facilitating re-entry (towards the goal of reducing childhood poverty). A 13 week shared parental leave for employees to care for children was also granted.

A series of research projects in the UK between 2000 and 2005 found evidence that full-time maternal employment during a child's first year of life was associated with poorer cognitive outcomes.³⁷⁷ Over these years, parental leave was extended significantly, to support more mothers to spend time with their children in this first year of life. Ordinary Maternity Leave (OML) was extended from 14 to 26 weeks, during which mothers were paid a flat rate, which was increased in successive legislation. Additional Maternity Leave (AML) was initially an optional 11 weeks' unpaid leave, which required a qualifying length of service in employment. Government increased this to 26 weeks and reduced the qualifying period of prior employment, before removing it entirely. This meant that all mothers in employment could access up to a year's statutory leave, regardless of how long they had been in employment. In 2007, paid leave was extended to 39 weeks in total, allowing lower income families to take longer amounts of leave.

These changes had a stark impact both on mothers' ability to take leave in a child's first year and their re-entry into the labour market. In 2002, 9% of mothers took six months of leave and just 5% took leave for the first year of their child's life.³⁷⁸ By 2008, take up had soared with 86% of mothers taking more than six months of leave and 23% taking a full year or more.³⁷⁹ However, a 2011 Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) survey revealed that by the end of Labour's time in office, pay was still a limiting factor in mother's ability to extend time spent with their baby.³⁸⁰ Very few mothers in the lowest pay bracket (earning less than £7.49 an hour) took leave beyond what was paid (39 weeks) and highest earning families were still most likely to have the mother take the full entitlement to a year, or more.³⁸¹ This may have been shaped by awareness of the new maternity leave entitlement, as well as by financial restraints: the same survey revealed that just over a third of mothers (35%) in the least skilled and lowest paying jobs thought that they were only legally entitled to 39 weeks' leave; with knowledge of legal entitlement correlated with the status of occupational group.³⁸²

Across the period, higher earnings were linked to an increased likelihood of mothers to return to the labour market after childbirth. However, a DWP survey in 2002 revealed that a larger proportion of lower-paid women were returning to work than had done in 1996, which independent researchers linked to the more robust protection of their jobs in legislation.³⁸³ In 2005 the same annual DWP survey found a similar proportion of women returning to work than in 2002, but a decline in the number of mothers who stayed at home because they couldn't find flexible employment or earn enough for childcare. The authors from the Policy Studies Institute suggested this was linked to the

new right to request flexible working patterns on return to work, alongside working tax credits which gave greater disposable income to low income families.³⁸⁴

Parenting Advice & Support

The New Labour government had also committed itself to improving parenting advice and support. One mechanism was through health services which were available to families. The 1999 consultation document *Supporting Families* suggested ways in which the health visitor role could be extended to support parenting skills alongside the traditional health checks for infants.³⁸⁵ By 2004 this extension of health visiting was established alongside other early intervention strategies into the new Child Health Promotion Programme (CHPP) of universal and targeted services for children aged 0-5, as part of the Every Child Matters agenda.

The CHPP replaced the previous Child Health Surveillance Programme and thereby placed new emphasis on the *preventative* role of child and family support services, whilst also broadening the definition of child health.³⁸⁶ The health visitor role had included a schedule of reviews, screening and immunisation for children, advice for parents and referral to specialist services when needed. The change under CHP extended universal regular health visits from 4 months to 1 year, at which time a systematic assessment of physical, emotional and social development was instated, which would dictate any further targeted services necessary. The extension of health visits was intended to facilitate an extension of visitors' work beyond physical health, to positive parenting and attachment. New weekly visits between birth and six weeks were intended to help "spot any problems with the early parent/baby relationship or the child's growth or health, which would then be referred to the general practitioner, and also help parents whose own relationship is under strain because of the changes following the birth of their child".³⁸⁷ Infant welfare clinics, previously focusing on health checks, were extended to include parenting support (in poorer areas often held in newly opened Sure Start centres). Sleep clinics and breastfeeding clinics also fell under the purview of health visitors, again often in Sure Start centres, alongside sessions offering more early years support including advice surgeries on early relationships and toddlers' behaviour.³⁸⁸ The effect of many of these new resources was studied in the reviews of Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) and later evaluations of Children's Centres, discussed later in this chapter.

Targeted Family Support

Alongside extension of universal health support for parenting, New Labour targeted extra investment in poorer areas. In 1998, the Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) were launched in 250 areas of high deprivation. They were intended to coordinate and add value to local services, which would be provided according to local need, for families in the immediate area with children aged 0-5.³⁸⁹ SSLPs operated on a locally-universal approach, open to everyone in the deprived local neighbourhood. It was thought this would increase access for 'hard-to-reach' 'sub-populations', including lone parents and teenage mothers.

By 2003, the programme had expanded, with 524 SSLPs operating around the country. However, their early evaluations showed mixed success, with some worrying early findings on the effects of parenting skills in vulnerable sub-populations. Whilst there were some findings of beneficial effects (including family functioning and a reduction of negative parenting amongst non-teens) there were also detrimental effects on a minority of 3 year olds within subgroups. The children of teen mothers,

children from workless households and lone-parent families all scored lower on verbal ability than counterparts in the comparison group.³⁹⁰ The 2005 report of the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) concluded that the intervention was more beneficial for moderately disadvantaged than for severely disadvantaged families. The NESS team hypothesised that those with more human capital were best able to make use of the services and so took them up more than they otherwise would have, leaving the most marginalised families with less access to finite services.³⁹¹ Health-led SSLPs were found to have more beneficial effects than others, which researchers attributed to health partners' familiarity with managing large services and their better ability to establish contact with families of children under four.³⁹²

Despite these disappointing early results, longer term research found positive effects of the early programme, particularly for vulnerable sub-groups. A longitudinal study investigated the effect on families in 150 of these original SSLP areas, following up 5,000 7-year olds initially studied aged 9 months, 3 and 5 years old. It compared them with a comparison from the Millennium Cohort Study of children living in statistically similar areas but without SSLP services. Four statistically significant differences emerged which applied to the whole population and sub-populations:

- “(1) engaging in less harsh discipline;
- (2) providing a more stimulating home learning environment...;
- (3) providing a less chaotic home environment for boys (not significant for girls);
- (4) having better life satisfaction (lone parent and workless households only).”³⁹³

The fact that these positive outcomes applied to the whole population and the final one for marginalised sub-populations, contrasted earlier findings and pointed to some success in attempts to affect ‘hard to reach’ families. The NESS team of researchers argued it was “very likely” that having less chaotic and violent home environments would yield benefits to children’s long-term educational, economic and societal inclusion over time.³⁹⁴

Teen mothers were a particularly vulnerable ‘sub-population’. When New Labour came to power, teenage mothers were more likely to live in poverty, to suffer post-natal depression, not to breastfeed and to have their children admitted to hospital – all risk factors for children’s developmental and language delay.³⁹⁵ At the beginning of the parliament, Britain had the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe.³⁹⁶

Teenage Pregnancy Strategy
<p>The Strategy was launched in 2000, with a target to halve the number of teenage conceptions by 2010. As with the NLS, there was a cascade structure, with cross-departmental funding towards a central government advisory group, regional teenage pregnancy coordinators (working across relevant health, education, youth services and parenting support programmes) and local authority teenage pregnancy coordinators. A bulk of national guidance documents informed local strategies including a push on sex and relationships education in schools and an increasing number of contraception and sexual health services focused on young people.</p> <p>Over the period, the rate of conception fell by 13.3 per cent from the 1998. The birth rate for under-18 conceptions fell by 25 per cent, owing to increasing numbers of young women opting for abortion. While the target was not met nationally, in many local authorities – including some of the poorest in the country – impressive progress was made, with some cutting rates by up to 45 per cent.³⁹⁷</p>

In 2001, 20 areas were invited to become Sure Start Plus (SS+) pilot programmes, aiming to reduce some of the negative parenting behaviours correlated with teenage parents. As with other SSLP services, programmes differed from area to area but eligible SSLPs were all expected to provide some one-to-one support for young mothers, focusing on their social, emotional wellbeing, education and health.³⁹⁸ An independent evaluation of the programme found it to have been successful in crisis support, with a statistically significant reduction of domestic violence and homelessness amongst the treatment group, in comparison to young mothers in matched areas.³⁹⁹ Children in the study did not have more good quality play and learning experiences, which researchers said was partially due to the short period of time after birth which SS+ worked with young mothers (often only the first few months – during which there was limited scope for educative play activities).⁴⁰⁰

In 2006, government announced a much more structured programme, working with young mothers until their children were aged 2 – the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) – to be trialled in 10 local authorities in England. The FNP was based on the successful US-based Nurse Family Partnership, an intense course of up to 64 home visits targeting first time young mothers, living in disadvantaged areas. The programme was delivered by trained Family Nurses, focusing on a range of topics including healthy parent-child attachment.⁴⁰¹ Visits included modelling parent-child interaction, information and guidance on personal and environmental health, and support to access other services. Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) on the intervention in the US had shown a reduction in abuse and neglect, as well as superior language and cognitive development for children in the treatment groups by the end of the intervention.⁴⁰²

England's FNP was rolled out across the country in 2008. As with Sure Start, there were mixed outcomes; on the impact to children's health the results of an RCT published in 2013 showed few statistically significant outcomes. However, in parenting behaviours there was evidence of significant impact. Language delays at 21 months were less prevalent in the treatment group and for the subgroup of women with low psychological resources. Children in the treatment group had superior language and mental development at 21 months, compared to the control group.⁴⁰³ There was also increased recording of safeguarding events and social services referral for the treatment group over the control group, suggesting that the programme allowed better identification and intervention for at risk children.⁴⁰⁴

Between 2006 and 2011 there was investment in early parenting intervention, through initially 18 local pilots and then national coverage of the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP). This gave local governments funding to spend on one of a selection of evidence-based (shown to be effective in at least one RCT), structured parenting programmes. However, these interventions targeted parents of children with behavioural difficulties aged 8-11 – in this case, reactive rather than preventative.^p

In New Labour's first and second terms, SSLPs were a source of parenting support in the most deprived areas. However the 2005 NESS report shifted public perception of Sure Start and increasingly the policy purpose of Sure Start Children's Centres. The initial NESS finding that the

^p For more detail on these interventions, see the box in Chapter One.

most disadvantaged accessed fewer services in SSLP areas, compared to matched areas, influenced a narrative that Sure Start had been ‘hijacked by the middle classes’, who were felt to be least in need of the parenting interventions on offer. (In reality, the beneficiaries of SSLP services had been parents in the penultimate deciles of deprivation; those who were deprived, but not the most deprived parents with multiple needs.⁴⁰⁵) Meanwhile both NESS and the Daycare Trust had critiqued the local area approach for not reaching all disadvantaged children, who did not exclusively live in deprived areas.⁴⁰⁶ Support for SSLPs in their original conception waned and Sure Start was reformulated as Sure Start Children’s Centres. These would be universal, offering tiered services according to levels of deprivation. *The Children’s Plan* committed additional funding to outreach with the most disadvantaged families.⁴⁰⁷

Following the positive findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE) on the universal benefits of quality early years education, new Children’s Centres would be more focused on childcare, alongside integrated health services and links to jobcentres. The ‘first wave’ of 800 Sure Start Children’s Centres had been established in the 20% most deprived areas by 2006, followed by a ‘second wave’ of 2,500 more in the 30% most deprived areas. From 2008 to 2010 a ‘third wave’ of 1,000 children’s centres aimed to create a children’s centre for every 800 children.⁴⁰⁸ Moving away from flexibility for local need towards uniform universal services, a new Core Offer⁴⁰⁹ was published. It stipulated that Children’s Centres in the most disadvantaged areas would offer a minimum of 10 hours a day integrated early learning and childcare (in the 70% least disadvantaged, Children’s Centres would just offer ‘stay and play’ sessions.)⁴¹⁰ However, as highlighted in earlier chapters, critics such as Norman Glass – one of the original developers of Sure Start in the Treasury – said that this new focus on childcare was a ‘capturing’ of SureStart “by the employability agenda”, shifting the aims of the programme away from child development to creating somewhere for parents to leave children while they went to work.^{411 412}

There was no stipulation in the core offer to offer evidence-based parenting programmes, although they were listed as the type of “family support” which could be on offer. A 2009 NAO evaluation showed that the earliest Sure Start Centres seemed to have the most effective parental outreach⁴¹³ and evidence presented to an Education Committee investigation in 2010 suggested later Children’s Centres were not funded adequately to do as much child-centred, parental education and health work.⁴¹⁴

Health Policy

Over New Labour’s period in government, there was a drive towards more integrated services around the child, through SSLPs and later Children’s Centres. However, policy theory and practice were not always aligned and at the end of the decade there were still significant challenges in coordination of collaboration.

Health and Literacy development

Maternal health plays an important role in explaining gaps in school readiness according to socio-economic status. A mother’s health and health-related behaviours during pregnancy and in the first year of a child’s life can have a significant impact on neuro-development, the foundations for later cognitive capacities and linguistic development.⁴¹⁵

This impact begins before a child is born. Maternal stress, diet, drug and tobacco use during pregnancy can all shape early brain development.⁴¹⁶ These factors are also linked to low birth weight, which has been associated with poorer educational outcomes.⁴¹⁷ In extreme instances, maternal health behaviours can lead to serious under-development. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, for instance, is the leading known cause of intellectual disability in Western countries.⁴¹⁸ Maternal health can contribute to prematurity, low birth weight and prenatal infections which in a minority of cases can cause hearing impairments.⁴¹⁹ If not diagnosed at birth, these can have serious and lasting impacts on children's language development.⁴²⁰

More common than physical ill health in shaping an infant's cognitive development is parental mental ill health. Post-natal depression can disrupt attachment, as well as developing communication and cognition skills; persistent parental mental health problems have been shown to limit a child's future cognitive development.⁴²¹

Maternal smoking, substance abuse, breastfeeding, depression and obesity are estimated to account for between 4% and 7% of the total socio-economic gap in education outcomes between low and middle income children in the US.⁴²² Insufficient studies have been conducted so far in a UK context, but the Marmot Review of inequalities and health found these behaviours were correlated with socio-economic status and linked to educational outcomes.⁴²³

Universal Services

In 2000 Labour's NHS Plan set a number of national and local targets for reducing health inequalities. A series of Public Service Agreements (PSAs) set out priorities for health spending. PSA Target 2 was to reduce health inequalities by 10% as measured by infant mortality and life expectancy at birth. Maternity services were given a key role in reducing the women who smoked during pregnancy and increasing breastfeeding rates towards this aim, focusing particularly on women in disadvantaged groups.⁴²⁴

There was a 40% drop in women smoking throughout their pregnancy between 2000 and 2010, although much of this was driven by larger population trends in quitting smoking.⁴²⁵ However, data from the Infant Feeding Survey showed that social class gaps in smoking during pregnancy narrowed at a faster rate over this period, as did drinking alcohol during pregnancy.⁴²⁶

Despite positive trends in smoking and drinking during pregnancy, low birthweight rose from 1996 to 2002, but then fell steadily afterwards, with the PSA target to reduce low birthweight by 5% being reached by the end of New Labour's time in government.⁴²⁷ The gap in percentage of low birthweight babies born to poorer and more affluent mothers halved between 2005 and 2010, to 16%. Likely this was linked to changes in health behaviours amongst lower income groups such as smoking and drinking.⁴²⁸ The effect of these changes on cognitive development and literacy outcomes for children will be lagged in the data, with children born between 2005 and 2010 contributing to EYFSP data in 2010-2015; they may explain part of the increase in outcomes by this measure over this period.

Changes from the Child Health Surveillance Programme to the Child Health Promotion Programme (CHPP) included an increased focus on children's language development. Children born deaf are

extremely vulnerable to delay in communication development, which in turn can hinder cognitive development. A newborn hearing screening was rolled out in the new CHPP and there was an introduction of a review at age two, to include assessment of speech, language and communication development. This new review allowed early intervention of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), with health visitors able to refer those in need to Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs).

Until 2002, SSLPs were part of the remit of The Department of Health, alongside the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions. Many maternity services operated on Sure Start Children's Centre sites during and after this period, as part of a strategy to build relationships with more vulnerable parents. A review of breastfeeding support in SSLPs found some increases in breastfeeding as a result of these programmes.⁴²⁹ Nationally, breastfeeding rates from 2000 rose dramatically, as did duration of breastfeeding. The Department for Health recommended babies were breastfed until 6 months; in 2005, only 33% of mothers who had started breastfeeding were still doing so at 6 months, by 2010 this was 42%.⁴³⁰ It is thought that, as well as breastfeeding support, this higher rate is also attributable to more mothers able to take maternity leave.⁴³¹

SLT services expanded in response to the SSLP and increasingly ran on-site at Children's Centres across this period, with language-related drop-in sessions available to all as well as SLT appointments for those who had been referred. Historically, a 'clinical' approach to SLCN had dominated SLT services, with needs understood within a 'medical model' of disability, whereby an individual's ailment had to be diagnosed and clinically treated through one-on-one services.⁴³² Analysing SLT practices after Sure Start Children's Centres, researchers have argued this heralded a new way of working for SLTs.⁴³³ This was underpinned by a reframing of SLCN as a 'public health' need; socially and environmentally determined and to be addressed through early preventative health work.⁴³⁴ A think piece by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists argued that this change influenced SLTs to "see their role in changing the child's communication environment as a key element of their practice".⁴³⁵ The universal elements of first SSLP and later Children's Centres, were a key part of this reimagining of public health work.

Targeted Services

From 2001, Sure Start Plus pilot areas aimed services at vulnerable teenage parents. Despite a statistically significant reduction in crises affecting mothers' emotional health, the programme was found to be less effective in its explicit health outcomes. These included smoking cessation, levels of breastfeeding and incidence of postnatal depression – all predictors of children's later cognitive and linguistic development.⁴³⁶ Authors of the evaluation attributed some of these disappointing outcomes to the fact that some outcomes were difficult to measure (e.g. postnatal depression) whilst others "had entrenched causes that were beyond the scope of the programme... more time and resources may have been necessary for health work to achieve an impact on these objectives in such a vulnerable and disadvantaged client group."⁴³⁷

The importance in shifting these entrenched difficulties was also highlighted by the other important targeted parenting intervention: The Family Nurse Partnership. In its US form, the programme had led to statistically significant reductions in smoking during pregnancy, in low birth weights and an increase in levels of breastfeeding among the target group of low income single mothers.⁴³⁸

However the UK randomised controlled trial did not find such outcomes either across the sample or in key subgroups such as mothers not in education, employment or training (NEET). The researchers were unable to explain why this was the case, although suggested that differences in welfare and universal healthcare policies may have meant that the UK mothers in the trial may have been less disadvantaged than their US counterparts.⁴³⁹ However, the study helped to highlight the vulnerability in the subgroup of first time teen mothers: 48% of the sample were NEET, 35% had previously been arrested, 46% had been excluded from school and 40% had experienced domestic violence in the 12 months before their child's second birthday.⁴⁴⁰ There was a clear need for more research into how to effectively support this vulnerable group in dealing with the complex acute problems they faced, and a need for more preventative work in secondary education to help reduce both the social problems for these vulnerable young people, their vulnerability to early pregnancy and the incidence of negative health behaviours impacting on their children such as smoking and not breastfeeding.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite its commitment for universal health and parenting support, four years after its introduction, the Department of Health expressed concerns that the CHPP was being given low priority in some areas.⁴⁴¹ There were reports that it was proving difficult to provide universal coverage and to reach vulnerable families. The 2008 DoH update to the CHPP described the importance of a skilled and flexible workforce and of strategic monitoring, evaluation and quality improvement on behalf of the primary care trust (PCT) and the local authority.⁴⁴²

By the end of the parliament, these themes of: the need for investment in the workforce, prioritisation of preventative work, and more strategic working across the PCT and the LA, were all still resonant – especially regarding children's literacy outcomes. Across New Labour's time in government, there was investment in the workforce, with an increase in midwife numbers over the decade. However a rising birth rate – especially in inner city areas – meant there were still stretched maternity services in inner city areas by 2009.⁴⁴³ This was exacerbating by declining numbers of Family Nurses over the period.

There was also a growing consensus that early health practitioners needed more SLCN-specific training. In 2008 John Bercow MP published his report on provision for children SLCN. He had called for training in SLCN to be prioritised for a range of frontline professionals and reported variable experiences for parents in their children's diagnoses. "Often [parents] were the first to recognise that something was wrong but they were frustrated that the professionals whom they approached for help, including health visitors and GPs, did not always take their concerns seriously."⁴⁴⁴ In 2010, the government's Communication Champion published a report which highlighted the need for language-development-specific training in driving best practice towards raised communication outcomes.⁴⁴⁵

Bercow felt that insufficient SLCN training was linked to a focus on acute need at the expense of universal preventative services. His report spoke to frontline professionals who "commented on the gap left by the changed role of health visitors and school health advisers in many areas, which has resulted in a trend of children with significant SLCN not being identified and referred to specialist services until later because universal surveillance is no longer present".⁴⁴⁶ It was felt that many

PCTs, under strain, were addressing their attention to obvious and acute needs, at the expense of lower-priority needs such as SLCN. “In many areas we visited... we found that frontline professionals did not always feel that sufficient priority was given to addressing the needs of children and young people with SLCN”.⁴⁴⁷ Bercow attributed some of this to insufficient accountability, with local area agreements. He found that many community strategies of local government did not sufficiently include health targets with services such as Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), provided by the PCTs. The Communication Champion’s report two years later found that children’s community health services remained low priority in some Primary Care Trusts.⁴⁴⁸

The fragmentation of services between LAs and PCTs contributed to the lack of accountability. Sure Start Children’s Centres, a main site of community health services, left the purview of the Department of Health in 2002 (despite evidence showing that early SSLPs led by health services were more effective, especially in outreach).⁴⁴⁹ After responsibility for Children’s Centres was given to Local Authorities, it remained important for health services to remain strongly integrated with other services offered on these sites. However, evidence given to the House of Commons 2010 inquiry into Children’s Centres suggested that this cross-service partnership was variable.⁴⁵⁰ While health visitors and midwives were seen to have a strong working relationship with Children’s Centres, evidence given to the inquiry suggested this was less the case for GPs.⁴⁵¹ Further training and support for integration were clear priorities to be carried over into the next parliament.

Early Education

Research revealed the crucial importance of the home learning environment over this period, but also the cognitive and linguistic returns from increasing access to formal education from the age of 1. However, support with childcare between ages 0-2 remained difficult for parents to navigate and of low quality, particularly in poorer areas.

Home Learning Environment

The home learning environment (HLE) is a crucial element in educational development. It has been estimated that the quality of parent-child linguistic and social interactions and home learning account for approximately 16% of the cognitive gap between rich and poor children at age 3.⁴⁵² This includes how often a child is read to; taken to the library; paints or draws at home; is taught counting, the alphabet, songs and rhymes.⁴⁵³

Studies focusing specifically on language development have suggested that exposure to speech between ages 1 and 2 affects a child’s vocabulary growth.⁴⁵⁴ Vocabulary size at age 2 has, in turn, been shown to be a strong predictor of language and literacy skills from ages 3 through to 11.⁴⁵⁵ The complexity of grammar structures children are exposed to in their early years (the study focused on children aged 2) has also been shown to shape the diversity and complexity of sentence structures they are later able to use.⁴⁵⁶ This research may explain why parental education accounts for as big a percentage of the cognitive gap as measures of the home learning environment;⁴⁵⁷ the breadth and complexity of the spoken language environment is shaped by parents’ own literacy skills. Parents’ working times and ability to take leave/work flexibly are also affected by education, with employees with less qualifications likely to have to hold down several jobs or to take shift work which can be obstructive to family time. These factors may also link parental education to infants’ exposure to language in the home.

Passive exposure to volume of language is not sufficient for a language rich home learning environment, though. The quality of interaction is important in language development. Parent-child conversations, which give children the opportunities to practice new words in a range of contexts, respond to open questions and extend their thoughts verbally are crucial in both vocabulary acquisition and broader literacy skills.⁴⁵⁸ This is linked to parent-child attachment and sensitive parenting, where children's communication is responded to. A study using the Millennium Cohort Study and breaking down elements of the home learning environment found a strong correlation between maternal affection and literacy skills for 3 year olds in the study but no such association for book reading and homework help.⁴⁵⁹

This corroborates other studies on parenting later in a child's life, which seem to suggest that interventions directed at parent-child relationships had stronger and longer-term effects on literacy skills than interventions focusing specifically on home reading and literacy.⁴⁶⁰ A randomised control trial of a series of parenting interventions for 7 to 9 year olds with conduct disorder found children's literacy skills still showed improvement 2 years after the intervention began *if it had focused on parent-child relationships and behaviour, rather than home literacy.*⁴⁶¹ Although there is evidence of correlation,⁴⁶² there is less research suggesting that HLE elements such as book sharing have a causal relationship with children's language development, in later years.⁴⁶³

Parents as Educators

The EPPE project found that "what parents do is more important than who they are", pointing to the importance of the home learning environment.⁴⁶⁴ New Labour's extension of the role of health visitors and increased investment in SLT services allowed Children's Centres to place emphasis on "communication and language-rich environments... to facilitate the acquisition of appropriate language skills, minimise the risk of communication problems and provide opportunities for greater interaction," according to evaluation by NESS.⁴⁶⁵

SSLPs offered different services, according to local need, and experimented with preventative SLT work, integrated with other service delivery. A 2005 NESS evaluation of SLT services gave an account of different types of group sessions on offer to support language and reading skills in one SSLP: Babble, Bounce and Rhyme sessions, introducing mothers and babies to communication through dance and singing; Story Sack training sessions, using visual aids to support oral storytelling; and Sure Speakers, a themed reading and craft session.⁴⁶⁶ In another SSLP, children were identified as needing intervention through health visitor 8- and 18-month checks, resulting in parents being invited to a home visiting programme using 'story bags' to increase parental involvement in language acquisition.⁴⁶⁷ Another SSLP also recorded SLT home visits (instead of centre appointments, which was the norm for SLT services when children who had been screened). This resulted in 96% success rate for initial contact for this targeted service, compared with less than 50% at conventional clinic settings.⁴⁶⁸

Because there was an insufficient focus on impact of services during the early years of SSLPs, and because there were not uniform services offered across SSLPs, it was harder to identify the outcomes of particular aspects of Sure Start services. A longitudinal NESS study explored outcomes for a sample of five year olds and their families across 150 SSLP areas, compared with a matched

group of families living in similarly deprived areas, taken from the Millennium Cohort Study. This suggested improvement in the home learning environment for mothers using SSLP services: there was a statistically significant increase in mothers in SSLP-areas reporting a cognitively stimulating home learning environment, compared to matched mothers in non-SSLP areas.⁴⁶⁹

Education and Care Settings

Despite the importance of what parents do in determining children's cognitive and linguistic development, a 2004 summary of the research by LSE academic Waldfogel pointed out that there was less known about how to significantly improve these aspects of parental behaviour. However, interventions focused on high-quality care and education had shown to be more readily effective in boosting cognitive development. "Thus, although parenting may be more important, interventions to improve non-parental care and education may be more effective."⁴⁷⁰

Research had shown that maternal employment in the first year of a child's life was correlated with poorer cognitive development and more behavioural problems. However, for children aged between 1 and 2 the evidence suggested "no adverse effects of maternal employment... but that there may be adverse effects on behaviour problems if children are in poor quality child care for long hours"⁴⁷¹ This research pointed to raising access to *quality* early years education and care, from the age of 1 onwards.

High quality, targeted interventions in improving childcare and education had been the subject of a large body of research and experimental studies in the US.⁴⁷² These had shown long-lasting positive outcomes, particularly when focused on social and emotional development.⁴⁷³ These studies had shown quality early education was more effective for children with lower socio-economic status, pointing to its importance in limiting the predictive power of poverty on children's cognitive development. For example, the Infant Health and Development Programme targeted low-birthweight children and provided centre-based care from the age of 1. It was found to have "boosted IQ at age 3 by 20 points for children whose mothers had less than a high school education, 10 points for children whose mothers had graduated high school only, and 0 points for children whose mothers had graduated college."⁴⁷⁴

It is important to point out that these outcomes, like those in the Nurse Family Partnership, may have been shaped by other policies in a US context and so may not have had like-for-like outcomes in the UK. However, UK evidence from the EPPE study did point towards a similar effect of high quality early childcare in an English context. One of the more significant findings from the EPPE study was that an early start (pre-3) at pre-school affected children's cognitive development and later academic attainment in primary school.⁴⁷⁵ The combination of a high quality setting and a longer duration in pre-school had the strongest effect on development in the study.⁴⁷⁶

Access to early pre-school rose during the New Labour period. An annual survey of parents suggests that 59% of all children aged 0-2 received some non-parental care in 2010,⁴⁷⁷ compared with 25% in 1997.⁴⁷⁸ The majority of this was centre based but a significant portion was with a childminder or nanny. However, disadvantaged families were the least likely to benefit from this rise in access. In 2006, government launched the *two year olds pilot programme*, with funding given to 32 local authorities to provide part time free childcare for disadvantaged 2 year olds.⁴⁷⁹ This was rolled out to

all Local Authorities from September 2009. However, by 2010 still only 15% of families with the highest levels of multiple disadvantage accessed formal provision, compared to 55% of families with the least disadvantage.⁴⁸⁰ More needed to be done to ensure those most in need benefitted from early education.

It was not only access which remained a challenge for this key age group; during this period, quality provision catering for 2 year olds was also far behind provision for ages 3 and 4. In 2010-11, Ofsted reported that 83% of settings offering entitlement places to 3 and 4 year olds were Good or better, compared to 70% of settings not offering the entitlement (and therefore including settings offering 'wraparound' care and care to children pre-3).⁴⁸¹ Deprivation by post-code exacerbated the quality gap: in the poorest areas more than a quarter of childcare on non-domestic premises (Ofsted's childcare category excluded childminders) were of less than Good quality.

Quality in care of 1-2 year olds looks different from that of 3-4s. Due to the importance of attachment and relationships in early social and emotional learning, low ratios and key-workers providing a continuity of care are important features of quality.⁴⁸² For this reason, childminders made up a large part of the sector catering to under 2s.⁴⁸³ Measures to drive up quality in this segment of the sector included extending Ofsted inspections to childminding (in 2001), extending the EYFS curriculum to childminders (in 2007) and maintaining low ratios (three children under 5 or one child under 1 to any one childminder) in the sector. However, qualification requirements were never extended to childminders. Training was on offer - SSLPs and later Children's Centre services were expected to provide support for childminders, though the development of childminding networks to share best practice and access to the same sessions as parents in developing a stimulating environment.

Despite no official qualification requirements, there was a shift in make-up and qualifications of the childminding workforce over this period, along with the rest of the sector. In 2003-2008 51% of the workforce had at least a Level 3 NVQ in 2003-2008, compared to 29% decade earlier.⁴⁸⁴ Qualifications amongst childminders continued to rise up to the end of the decade.⁴⁸⁵

However, by 2010, for childminders in poorer areas, only 55% were Good or better according to Ofsted, compared to 72% in the least deprived areas.⁴⁸⁶ As poor quality pre-3 childcare had been shown in the literature to have a damaging effect on cognitive development, these statistics were particularly worrying. If early education was to have its strongest effect on the children most in need of it, both access to and quality of provision for 2 year olds in the poorest areas required further investment in the years to come.

Child and Family Services under The Coalition

Despite protected funding for entitlement and recruitment of health visitors and family nurses, substantial cuts to local authority budgets limited the efficacy of services. Meanwhile, absolute child poverty increased substantially. Evidence indicates that this will have a long-term effect on children’s cognitive development, undermining the positive work of the last two decades.

Key Strengths	Tensions & Challenges
Parenting Policy	
<p>Investment in health visitor recruitment helped increase access to support for parents. The Family Nurse Partnership was expanded to reach another 5,000 vulnerable families.</p> <p>The Troubled Families Programme was launched, targeting families with multiple needs.</p>	<p>Council cuts resulted in a reduction of parenting services on offer in children’s centres. In areas experiencing deeper cuts, there was less positive impact of children’s centre services.</p> <p>The potential of council gains from Payment by Results for the Troubled Families programme meant this funding for acute need was prioritised over preventative work in council budgets.</p>
Health Policy	
<p>The Health Visitor Implementation Plan was launched and certain checks and immunisations made statutory towards making HCP fully universal.</p> <p>An Integrated Progress Check was piloted to improve early identification of SLCN. There were plans for health services to come under council control to aid integration between services.</p>	<p>Cuts to local authority budgets meant that SLCN services were reduced.</p> <p>Statutory duties on councils and frameworks for collaboration between services were removed. As a result, local authorities began to separate the planning of education services and children’s services, creating a further barrier to integration of practice.</p>
Education Policy	
<p>Free childcare for the 20% most disadvantaged 2 year olds was made a legal entitlement. It was extended to the 40% most disadvantaged.</p> <p>The Coalition piloted an expansion of maintained places for disadvantaged 2 year olds and encouraged school nurseries to offer this provision.</p> <p>Government legislated for childminder agencies to allow childminders to work collectively in networks.</p>	<p>Access for poorer families did not increase substantially over the period. The cost of childcare rose and the take-up of free childcare for 2 year olds remained low.</p> <p>Children’s Centres were no longer required to offer day care or to hire staff with teaching and early year qualifications, reducing access to quality childcare in poorer areas from this type of provider.</p> <p>Changes to LA responsibilities and funding led to reduced development opportunities for practitioners and parents.</p>

Parenting Policy

When the Coalition came to power, the numbers of health visitors were in decline and lack of capacity meant the CHP was not always implemented universally.⁴⁸⁷ The 2010 NHS workforce census data showed that large proportions of younger health visitors were leaving the profession and 1 in 5 health visitors were over 55, therefore approaching retirement.⁴⁸⁸ The Coalition pledged to increase the number of health visitors, launching the Health Visitor Implementation Plan to train 4,200 more by the end of the parliament. There was also investment in the family nurse partnership, aiming to increase its reach from 11,000 families to 16,000.

Public Attitudes to Parenting Support

In 2016, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty commission investigated parents' experiences and understanding of early years services, with a telephone or online survey of 1,000 parents. They found that 73% of families took up antenatal support "beyond routine midwife appointments" but that families with a lower socio-economic status "were significantly more likely to have not attended any kind of antenatal class" compared to those with higher socio-economic status.⁴⁸⁹ Working class parents were also less likely to say they wanted advice, or to seek information from friends, online and books. Interestingly, the majority of parents who didn't access support said this was because they didn't think they needed to. The research points to the need for more public information on the importance of parenting and the benefits of support on children's cognitive outcomes and life chances.

'Nudge theory' has become popular in policymaking under the Coalition government, using insights from behavioural science to shift public attitude and behaviour, with beneficial outcomes as the result of inexpensive policy tweaks. RCTs on the wording of tax return letters, for instance, found that informing the recipient of how many people in their local area had successfully filled in their tax return increased the number of people who followed suit, after receiving the letter.⁴⁹⁰ Showing that most people performed the desired behaviour led to a significant change in people's perception. In constructing parenting support and learning about parenting as a normal activity prevalent in society might be fruitful in shifting stigma around parenting support amongst lower income groups.

Despite investment in some aspects of parenting support, there were reductions in access and impact of services accessed and funded through children's centres over this period.

Under New Labour, children's centres had intended to be a universal service but in times of austerity, the Coalition pledged to 're-focus' children's centres on the most deprived. Accordingly, a shift in services on offer in Children's Centres seemed to take place over this period. A study by NatCen Social Research and academics at the University of Oxford examined the services on offer in a sample of 121 Sure Start Children's Centres between 2011 and 2012.⁴⁹¹ The report noted more targeted rather than universal services, with increased outreach. However, they also noted less parenting support on offer.⁴⁹²

A 2015 government-funded evaluation of Children's Centres work found that some centres were still having an impact on parenting and the home learning environment. However, this was contingent on whether councils had continued to prioritise full funding: "[f]amilies registered at centres not experiencing cuts to services (compared with those registered at centres that had experienced cuts

to budgets/staffing) showed reductions in scores for CHAOS [Confusion, Hubbub and Order Scale], Parental Distress, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction as well as increases in early HLE.”⁴⁹³ A review of children’s centres in the 30% most deprived areas concluded that “staff and managers are working very hard to meet the needs of their communities. However, their overall capacity to reach those needs is, by their own admission, overstretched.”⁴⁹⁴

The ring fence was removed from Sure Start funding to local councils and the Early Intervention Grant was ended; councils had to balance these services against other pressures on their budgets. Analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that the scrapping or consolidation of different grants affected the most deprived local authorities the most during this period, making spending decisions in these areas hardest.⁴⁹⁵ As funding was devolved to local councils, it was difficult to track exactly how spending on early intervention has changed. Of the three strands of early intervention spending, it is estimated that 79% of LAs cut spending on children’s centres, 57% on family support services – including targeted and universal services – and 66% cut funding for young people’s services between 2010-11 and 2014-15.⁴⁹⁶ Analysis by the National Children’s Bureau and Action for Children indicated a trend in councils prioritising acute need over longer-term prevention.⁴⁹⁷ The total number of Sure Start sites fell from 3,631 to 3,019 between 2010 and 2014, although mergers of centres meant that government held the loss at only 72 centres across the country.⁴⁹⁸

In addressing acute need, the government launched the high profile Troubled Families programme (TFP) in 2011. The programme aimed to ‘turn around’ the lives of 120,000 families facing multiple problems over three years from 2012 to 2015. In a speech laying out the project, the Prime Minister David Cameron pointed to parenting and intergenerational problems, describing “a culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.”⁴⁹⁹ The target group for TFP was based on Cabinet Office Analysis of a 2005 Family and Children Survey, which found that 2% of the United Kingdom population were families with dependent children and at least five of the following characteristics:

- a) “no parent in work,
- b) poor quality housing,
- c) no parent with qualifications,
- d) mother with mental health problems,
- e) one parent with longstanding disability/illness,
- f) family has low income,
- g) family cannot afford some food/clothing items”⁵⁰⁰

Initially the programme was targeted and families with older children but was extended to those with younger children in 2015. It was led by local authorities, with an investment of £448 million over three years from central government, and an expectation of additional resources of £600 million from local authorities. Local authorities were paid by results – initially for identifying and attaching a family to the programme and again if the family achieved an outcome which the DCLG deems to be evidence of having been ‘turned around’. In 2015, a DCLG press release said that 99% of families on the programme had been ‘turned around’.⁵⁰¹ However, an NAO report two years earlier had raised concerns that despite the fact that the families in question had multiple challenges, the programme design meant that they were classed as ‘turned around’ if just one of those challenges showed improvement.⁵⁰²

The independent evaluation of the TFP is still pending, but academics have questioned the programme's scope for positive results, based on the evidence base from which the programme was designed.⁵⁰³ The programme drew upon research into Family Intervention Programmes (FIPs) carried out between 2007 and 2011. An independent review compared outcomes for families in the FIPs with a matched group and found evidence of crime reduction, a statistically insignificant reduction in education and employment problems, and limited evidence for improvement in family functioning as a result of FIPs.⁵⁰⁴ Furthermore, there was little evidence that improvements for families were sustained beyond the period of intensive support.⁵⁰⁵ Recent analysis of local authority spending found that family support services were often protected, as part of the TFP, at the expense of spending on children's centres and young people's services.⁵⁰⁶ This is worrying given the evidence of the efficacy of children's centre interventions in improving family lives and the wellbeing of children, in comparison for the less clear evidence for TFP.

Health Policy

As well as increasing capacity through the recruitment of health visitors (HV) and family nurses, the Coalition government also sought to ensure more of the HCP was made universal. Although under new Labour there had been a practice of tiered services, according to levels of need, the Coalition's Health Visitor Implementation Plan made this tiered set of services explicit:

- *Your Community* encompassed the set of community services which Health Visitors ought to promote to families, including Sure Start services.
- *Universal services* encompassed the Health Child Programme of immunisations, health and development checks as well as support and signposting for parents – to be mandatory for all clients of the health visiting service.
- *Universal plus* included rapid response services, drawing on experts in the HV team, employed according to need. This was to support with issues such as postnatal depression, weaning or parenting questions.
- *Universal partnership plus* would provide ongoing support from the HV team and from referred services (including children's centres, FNP and social services where necessary) for intervention work with families with complex needs.

Under New Labour, the Bercow report had raised concerns that previous changes to health visitor roles had left the service over-stretched and contributed to SLCN needs going undiagnosed.⁵⁰⁷ The Coalition's refiguring of HV services shifted the primary focus to universal screening and ensured that funding and resource were prioritised there.⁵⁰⁸ Although under the previous government HCP checks had been intended as universal, in practice they had often been delivered inconsistently, according to capacity.⁵⁰⁹ The Coalition's Implementation Plan required that 5 elements of health visiting became mandatory: antenatal promotion visits; the new baby review; a 6-8 week assessment; a 1 year assessment; and the 2 to 2 ½ year review. Health visitors were required to focus on 6 'high impact areas': transition to parenthood in the early weeks; maternal mental health; breastfeeding; healthy weight; managing minor illnesses and reducing accidents; and the health, wellbeing and development at two years to be 'school ready'.⁵¹⁰ This last high impact area pointed to literacy development age 2 and the importance of the review in screening children with SLCN needs.

To aid this final objective, the Coalition piloted the Integrated Review. Tickell's 2011 review of the EYFS curriculum had recommended a new Progress Check at age 2 ½ to be carried out by childcare and early years practitioners. Tickell's review also recommended that this be a point for information sharing between health and education professionals, as some parents felt they received conflicting advice about their children's progress at this time. There was sometimes confusion which resulted in children not being referred to SLT services when they might need to be.⁵¹¹ A pilot of the integrated review was carried out and its final evaluation concluded without sufficient evidence to say whether the new approach would allow more effective early identification of need. However, in most areas the practitioners involved perceived the process had helped improve joint working and information sharing.⁵¹²

Despite this move towards integration in the integrated review, there was some evidence that larger scale local integration of services was reduced over the course of the parliament. Under New Labour's Every Child Matters framework, local authorities had had a statutory responsibility to integrate services. Councils were advised against separating education and children's services and against merging child and adult social care.⁵¹³ Supported by a Common Assessment Framework (CAF), police, health, education and social services were required to share information with one another. These statutory duties were removed under the Coalition and the local Children's Trusts, which had co-ordinated children's services, were also discontinued (although Local Safeguarding Boards continued to oversee integration of child protection and early help).⁵¹⁴ Research into the organisation of services in local authorities found that by 2012 some were splitting education and children's services into separate departments and others were merging responsibility for children's and adult's social care.⁵¹⁵ This created a further potential barrier to the integration of these services in delivery.

In her final 2012 report, the Communications Champion Jean Gross expressed her concern about joint planning for children with SLCN. She attributed poor integrated working and early identification at age 2 to "increasing evidence of significant cuts to front-line speech and language therapy (SLT) services and to the specialist advisory teaching services on which parents and children depend, as a result of the requirement on the NHS to make savings, and the reductions to local authority budgets."⁵¹⁶

Education Policy

Parents as Educators

A strong body of research had shown that living in poverty during childhood could have a long-term negative impact on children's educational attainment, health, happiness and future employment.⁵¹⁷ Even a few years of poverty can affect a child's development, especially if occurring before five.⁵¹⁸ However, over the Coalition's time in power, families with young children were most affected by tax benefit reforms, leading to a rise in child poverty by both relative and absolute measures.⁵¹⁹

Several grants which benefitted younger families were abolished: the 'Baby Tax Credit' which doubled the family element of the Child Tax Credit; the 'Health in Pregnancy Grant' an early Child

Benefit paid during the last trimester of pregnancy; the Sure Start Maternity Grant, a £500 grant paid at birth to low income families to help with costs such as a pushchair or cot, which was protected for first-borns but stopped for any further children born to the same family; and the Child Trust Fund, up to £500 which was paid into a savings account for all new babies, with later top ups for low income families. Child Benefit was also frozen and the number of hours a family had to work to be eligible for Working Tax Credits rose from 16 to 24, reducing the regular income of low-income families with children.⁵²⁰

Between 2010 and 2015, 0.5 million more children fell into absolute poverty.⁵²¹ The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that the number of children in relative poverty would have risen from 3.6million in 2010 to 4.3million by 2020.⁵²² As well as having a knock-on effect on young families' housing conditions (for instance, numbers of homeless families placed in Bed & Breakfast accommodation rose from 630 to 2080 between 2010 and 2014)⁵²³, lower incomes also affected families' ability to afford paid educational experiences for their children, or childcare. A survey conducted by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty (SMCP) Commission investigated experiences of services and information in the early years amongst 1000 parents.⁵²⁴ Researchers found the majority of parents had taken their class to some type of activity group before the child turned one (91%), but that middle class parents (from social group ABC1) were more likely to do this (93%) than their working class counterparts (from social group C2DE – 88%).⁵²⁵ Middle class parents were more likely to be taking their children to activities “intended to improve parent/child communication and interaction, and structured activities which enable school readiness by exposing children to the format of instructor and focused activity.”⁵²⁶ Meanwhile, working class parents were likely to access free/cheaper activities.

The government planned to balance cuts to benefits with more support towards the cost of childcare. The childcare element of the working tax credit was previously available to reimburse up to 70% of childcare costs for families on low incomes, providing parents work at least 16 hours per week. The Coalition planned to extend this with Universal Credit (UC) which would allow up to 85% of childcare costs to be reimbursed for those working 24+ hours a week. Unfortunately, the roll out of UC had to be pushed back several times and by the end of the parliament was yet to be universal. Until 2015, parents working with particular employers could also claim tax and National Insurance relief of up to £930 a year to subsidise the cost of childcare, through Childcare Vouchers. In 2015, this was replaced with Tax Free Childcare, through which government would pay 20% of childcare costs to a maximum of £10,000 per child for parents not eligible for Universal Credit. (However, this was in effect a regressive support, as it offered larger subsidy to parents who paid more for childcare.)

Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes?

In 2013, academics from the London School of Economics undertook a systematic review of relevant research studies on the relationship between income and children's outcomes. 34 studies which occurred in OECD countries from 1988 to 2012 were included in the sample. Research methods included randomised control trials (RCTs), natural experiments (where control and treatment style circumstances occur naturally, e.g. a localised oil shock in Norway) and regression analyses on longitudinal household survey data. The review found strong evidence of a causal impact of household income on children's outcomes; low outcomes for poorer children

occurred “in part *because they are poorer* and not just because poverty is correlated with other household and parental characteristics”.⁵²⁷

The clearest evidence related to cognitive development and school achievement (evidence on physical health was more mixed). This supported two theories as to the mechanisms of the relationship between low income and children’s outcomes. The **Family Stress Model** posits that low income can cause parental stress and anxiety, which can affect child development. Several studies pointed to a causal impact of low income on maternal mental health and parenting behaviour, consistent with this model. The **Investment Model** posits that low income affects parents’ abilities to invest in goods and services which can further their child’s development (e.g. the resources which make up the home learning environment). Some evidence pointed to this as a causal factor in reducing children’s development, though there was less evidence for this model. The researchers called for more qualitative research to be done, to investigate causal mechanisms.

The relationship between income and outcomes was shown to be non-linear in the studies; it appeared that those on lower incomes were affected the most by changes in income. The majority of studies indicated that early childhood matters most for cognitive outcomes. Authors referenced poverty academic Susan Mayer’s description of income support policies as the “ultimate ‘multipurpose’ policy instrument” as “few other policies are likely to affect so many outcomes at the same time.”⁵²⁸ The LSE academics concluded that “however well-intentioned” the “Coalition Government’s deficit reduction strategy... to reduce welfare budgets in order to limit spending cuts to essential public services including education... is likely to be self-defeating... reductions in household financial resources will damage the broader home environment in ways that will make it harder for public services to deliver for children.”⁵²⁹

Despite help to subsidise childcare costs, respondents to the SMCP survey revealed that childcare costs were a disincentive to parents thinking of returning to work. The lower a parents’ income bracket and social group, the more likely they were to agree with the statement “I would like to return to work/work more hours but the cost of childcare puts me off”. This was 78% of parents in socio-economic group E and 63% of socio-economic group D compared to only 39% for group A parents.⁵³⁰ The childcare element of the working tax credit required parents to pay the costs of childcare up front and apply for reimbursement; challenging for those families on a very tight budget. It could also become invalid if one or other parents’ working hours fell below 16 in a week (rising to 24 after the rollout of universal credit); a challenge for flexible or seasonal workers as most nurseries and childminders require parents to pay for childcare a month in advance.⁵³¹

The SMCP survey also revealed that understanding of help to access childcare also differed according to socioeconomic status. Over half (53%) of C2DE parents said “they had no idea that there was any help available at all, or they know there was something but had no idea of the scale, the source or the process to receive it.” Meanwhile a similar proportion of parents in middle class social groups (56%) said they had either a “very clear or reasonable idea about possible support”.⁵³²

Cost of childcare rose from 2010 to 2015. Whereas in 2010 the average national cost of childcare for 25 hours a week was £88 for a child under 2,⁵³³ by 2015 this had risen to £116.77.⁵³⁴ A maximum of £122.50 can be claimed from Working Tax Credits to help with childcare.⁵³⁵ However, 2016 research by the Family and Childcare Trust found that in 11 local authorities, the average cost of part-time

childcare exceeded this amount.⁵³⁶ Despite the SMCP's findings, government figures from an annual parents' survey suggested a large drop in the proportion parents feeling childcare was unaffordable at the end of the parliament.⁵³⁷ The percentage of parents who felt childcare was unaffordable was at its highest since 2004 in the year 2012-13, with almost 2 out of 5 parents holding this opinion (39%). However, the following year showed a dramatic drop in this proportion, down to a third of parents, and a 7 percentage point rise in the number of parents describing it as 'very good/fairly good'.⁵³⁸

Education & Childcare Settings

In 2010, the Coalition announced a legal entitlement to 15 hours free childcare a week for the 20% most disadvantaged 2 year olds, extended to the 40% most disadvantaged in 2012. There had been positive outcomes for children involved in the pilot of the disadvantaged 2 year olds' entitlement,⁵³⁹ yet take up of this free education was low from the outset. By the time the programme was fully implemented in 2015, only 58% of all eligible 2 year olds were taking up their provision.

Nearly all of these (56% of all eligible 2 year olds) did so in the PVI sector. This meant that expansion of places was in the lowest quality settings: PVIs in deprived areas. Ofsted's Chief of Inspectors⁵⁴⁰ and successive DfE Ministers Liz Truss⁵⁴¹ and Sam Gyimah⁵⁴² called for schools to expand their nurseries to cater for two year olds with the entitlement offer, thus expanding the number of maintained places.

Similar to policy projects in the primary sector, government's actions towards schools expansion to 2 year olds involved changing legislation to make this easier and commissioning research in best practice. Legislation made it easier for schools to expand by removing the need to register as a new setting if nursery care was expanded to two year olds, allowing childminders to provide care on school premises and allowing childcare providers to register once for several premises so that schools could run a range of pre-school provision off-site in a hub and spoke model.⁵⁴³ Government also launched a *Two year olds in schools demonstration project* with 50 schools to explore the scope and challenges of more schools providing place for 2 year olds.⁵⁴⁴ The National Children's Bureau and Frontier Economics were commissioned to undertake a process evaluation. However, the authors raised questions over the sustainability of the project. Although pilot schools had £10,000 start-up funding, the research found that many schools had had to draw on existing financial resources or local authority grants to subsidise the provision. Many providers reported concerns about the long-term financial viability of the project. In 2015, Ofsted's early years report called for more schools to be involved in the offering provision for 2 year olds. However, they highlighted that, of the 5,000 schools providing for 2 year olds at the moment, the majority of places were being taken by better off families.⁵⁴⁵

The take-up of childcare for all children aged 0-2 did not change dramatically across the parliament. An annual survey of parents suggested that 59% of all children aged 0-2 received non-parental care in 2010 and 39% used a formal provider for this care.⁵⁴⁶ In 2015 these proportions were 60% and 40% respectively.⁵⁴⁷ Of children accessing formal care, the most popular setting was a PVI nursery (17% in 2010, 20% in 2015), followed by a registered childminder/nanny (7% in 2010, 8% in 2015) and maintained nursery (8% in 2010 and 6% in 2015).⁵⁴⁸ Despite being more likely to offer better

quality care, fewer children in total were accessing provision in maintained settings by the end of the parliament.

Children's Centres were previously mechanisms of ensuring access in deprived areas and driving quality in the PVI sector. They were part of a set of policies (including NNI and EECs) to subsidise PVI settings in poorer areas.⁹ Children's Centres in the 30% most deprived areas had a legal requirement to offer full day care. Though provision in children's centres normally was classified as PVI, this provision was often of higher quality than typical PVIs in poorer areas because children's centres were legally required to have staff with both qualified teacher status and early years professional status. This was part of the New Labour national strategy for a graduate-led workforce by 2020. In 2010 this requirement for children's centres was removed.

The Coalition also removed the requirement for those centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas to provide full day care. There was a consequent fall in centres offering full day care: between 2010 and 2013, the proportion fell from 25% to only 15% of centres.⁵⁴⁹ In the 30% most deprived areas, there was a 48% decrease in full day care provision in children's centres between 2009 and 2013.⁵⁵⁰ Therefore, the small increase in children aged 0-2 taking up provision in PVI settings is likely to indicate a growth in the PVI sector outside of Children's Centres. Data is not easily collected on children not receiving the entitlement and so it cannot be said how many children aged 0-2 are in settings with a graduate. However, by recent estimations of those deprived 2 year olds accessing entitlement, only 45% did so in a setting where an adult working with a specialised graduate qualification worked directly with children.⁵⁵¹ There is some indication that a low take-up of entitlement is linked to a reduction in availability in poorer areas. By 2015 only 35% of local authorities in England were reporting sufficient childcare places for children aged 0-2.⁵⁵²

Children's Centres were also, historically, a mechanism for improving quality of other provision for 0-2 year olds. Informal childcare providers (such as grandparents and family members) could use drop-in sessions to learn more about communication and stimulation for the infants in their care. Local Authorities were also responsible for accrediting formal childcare providers on domestic properties – childminders – and for organising childminder networks to improve their professional development. This often happened from children's centre sites.

Research into quality in early childcare settings has found that childminders belonging to networks tend to be "more responsive to children's needs and score higher on environmental rating scales".⁵⁵³ 2015 analysis of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2 year olds has corroborated this. Within a sample of 99 childminders, participation in a Quality Improvement Programme or Quality Assurance Scheme (QIP/QAS) predicted the quality of the childcare childminders were providing.⁵⁵⁴ However, the research also found that many childminders in the sample had been in a LA network which was discontinued because of funding. The number of centres offering childminder's drop-in sessions has fallen over the parliament.⁵⁵⁵ This suggests that council funding cuts threaten this mechanism of quality improvement in the sector.

⁹ For more detail see the New Labour section of the Early Years chapter

In 2014, the Coalition launched a consultation on Local Authorities' role in supporting settings. Following this, government removed the requirement for government to inspect settings or to provide support for settings which were Good or better. From 2014, local authorities were also no longer required to accredit childminders. There were concerns from sector academics that this shift in LA responsibilities would have implications for the effective rolling out of the Progress Check across providers with little experience of a more formal assessment process.⁵⁵⁶ The Coalition sought to replace the support of LAs through legislation for childminder agencies (CMAs). Consultation papers in 2013 proposed CMAs would "relieve childminders of some of the burdens of setting up their own business, provide training and match childminders with parents."⁵⁵⁷ However, there were no statutory requirements for childminders to register with CMAs and by 2015, Ofsted revealed that none of the childminder agencies which had registered with them had any childminders on their books.⁵⁵⁸

Despite a decline in access to ongoing training and support, between 2010 and 2013 (the period for which government data has been published) there was a rise in qualifications across the sector – including for childminders. The Nutbrown review had called for a Level 3 minimum qualification across the workforce, including childminders, which had not been taken up by the government. However, the Coalition had advised Local Authorities that childminders who were offering the entitlement must at least be working towards a Level 3 qualification.⁵⁵⁹ By 2013, 66% of childminders held a relevant Level 3 qualification, up from 54% in 2010. However, sector academics have pointed to the rising cost of qualifications as a barrier to the ambition of Level 3 as a universal minimum.⁵⁶⁰ This was particularly challenging for childminders whose costs as a business (such as Ofsted registration) rose over the parliament. A 2016 policy briefing from PACEY (the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) recorded "rising cost of Level 3 courses, which have increased sevenfold in the last three years, from £250 in 2012 to £1,900, while local authority support has diminished."⁵⁶¹ The organisation called for the development of a workforce strategy which would include funding to support the workforce in deprived areas gain better qualifications.

The number of registered childminders had been in decline from 2003, when there were 72,900. By 2010 there were only 57,900 registered (only 47,000 actively working) and this continued to fall, hitting 55,900 (46,100) by 2013.⁵⁶² However, there was evidence of a large number of unregistered childminders, nannies and au pairs operating across the country (despite this being illegal).⁵⁶³ On the supply side, this increased as the burden of registration costs, Ofsted scrutiny, EYFS progress check paper work and self-employed administration may have acted as an incentive for fewer childminders to register and operate formally. On the demand side, the cost of formal childcare and the flexibility of unregistered childcare have been identified as two key drivers of parents choosing unregistered childcare.⁵⁶⁴ These factors are particularly important for families with very low incomes and irregular working patterns.⁵⁶⁵ This suggests that poorer families are most likely to be using childcare which is not regulated or quality assured.

Looking forward to 2020

The strengths of previous infant and family policy were in extending opportunities to mothers to be with their children in the first year of life; developing best practice in supporting parents; and beginning to regulate the quality of childcare and early years. To really improve quality in this section of the sector we need to learn lessons from success in early years policy affecting children aged 3-4. A step change requires universal access to childcare and early education from age 1; driving up quality, starting with the poorest areas, through a strategy for professional development; and developing best practice in supporting the parents most in need.

Unfortunately, the strides made in primary, early years and infant and maternal services towards closing the socioeconomic gap in literacy outcomes are likely to be undermined by the impact of rising child poverty. Evidence suggests that to really change the gap in children's early cognitive and communication development, we need to improve the incomes of young families living in poverty.

Meanwhile, rather than making a step change in infant and family services, it will be a struggle over the next parliament to maintain various services: to maintain quality in parenting support, despite substantial cuts to local budgets; to maintain SLT services for early identification and intervention, despite an increase in acute need which are prioritised in health funds; and to maintain access to affordable and regulated childcare for under 2 year olds, despite the pressures of delivering extended entitlement to children aged 3-4 and increased staffing costs through a raising of the minimum wage. All this will be worsened by rising child poverty over the next five years.

Parenting & health services

From October 2015, local authorities took over responsibility for children's public health (previously the remit of NHS England). This provides a new opportunity to integrate the planning and funding of health (including health visiting) with other early years services including Children's Centres and early education (local authorities are still responsible for planning sufficient childcare places).

However, while public health budgets for local authorities are ring-fenced – putting them under somewhat less pressure than many other local services – the scope of public health is potentially large, with many competing demands on budgets, including rising incidence of acute need. Given the continuing funding squeeze on local government as a whole, public health budgets will undoubtedly come under pressure in the next five years. These funding pressures are likely to threaten further the parenting services available in children's centres.

The focus must therefore be on a clear set of evidence-based spending priorities, and on the greater integration of budgets and services at the local level, to improve quality and maximise the impact of increasingly limited resources. A new strategy for children's centres would support this, focusing on families with children aged 0-2 and offering integrated care, parenting intervention programmes, stay-and-play and on-site education and care.

Access to Quality Education 0-2

The 2016 NAO report states that expansion of entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds "could put further implementation of the entitlement for disadvantaged 2-year-olds at risk".⁵⁶⁶ This is because providers with finite capacity and restricted budgets may choose to offer more hours to their

existing 3- and 4-year olds rather than expand provision to cater to 2 year olds, who require lower staff: child ratios.

A solution championed by Ofsted and the DfE is an expansion of maintained places for eligible two year olds. 2 year old provision is more expensive than that for 3 year olds, as ratios are lower, which means PVI in poorer areas can struggle to cross-subsidise to create these places. However, schools have a larger budget to draw on for cross-subsidy. Nevertheless, Ofsted points out that maintained places currently in schools are dominated by affluent parents; more research must be done to understand why this is the case.

Recent DfE research, described by the NAO, has identified awareness in Bangladeshi, Somali and Polish communities as a barrier preventing eligible families from taking up their entitlement and launched a communications strategy to address this. Greater local integration between health and children's services could also help more families understand what they are entitled to in terms of childcare support. Health services available to new parents should look to help increase take-up of the entitlement to free childcare for disadvantaged 2 year olds, as well as support parents in understanding how to access the childcare element of universal credit.

Child Poverty

Analysis from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) on the 2016 summer budget projects that absolute child poverty will increase from 15.1% in 2015/16 to 18.3% in 2020, driven entirely by "the sharp rise in poverty among families with three or more children, which is itself the result of planned tax and benefit reforms."⁵⁶⁷ As the lowest incomes are expected not to increase at the same rate as the median income, and as tax and benefit reforms have protected some groups (e.g. pensioners) more than others, child poverty is set to rise from 17.8% to 25.7% over the same period, reversing most of the fall since 1997.⁵⁶⁸

We know that a lot of the gap in cognitive and linguistic development in the first few years is shaped by the impact of material poverty on parents' mental health, ability to spend quality time communicating with their infants, and their living conditions. With more than a quarter of children expected to be born in relative poverty by the end of the decade, we can expect increasing incidents of poor infant attachment, delayed language development and SLCN needs across a generation of children. Without addressing childhood poverty, we run the risk of undoing the work of two decades towards ending illiteracy.

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