

POLICY MAKING | FOR LEFT-BEHIND GROUPS

School readiness

How can government start closing the opportunity gap in early years education?



About this report

This report examines which groups of children are at risk of not being 'school ready' by the end of reception year, in the context of the Labour government's opportunity mission.

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Foreword

The Institute for Government is committed to improving how government designs and implements policy. 'Policy making for left-behind groups' is a new series exploring how Keir Starmer's government can use its mission-based approach to deliver better outcomes for groups who have experienced persistent disadvantage, across many policy areas and decades.

These are groups whose specific needs may not always be recognised or fully understood, who may have been deprioritised by policy makers (for whatever reason) or who have been deemed too difficult or costly to engage with by successive governments. In other words, those most under-served, or 'left behind', by government.

The series will use new analysis to recommend how government can improve the design and implementation of policy to improve the lives of people most at risk of being missed. The first project in the series examines the Labour government's 'opportunity mission' – the explicit aim of which is to 'close the opportunity gap' by breaking the link between a child's background and their future success. This will, it says, be achieved by setting up every child for the best start in life and the key milestone for this parliament is for 75% of children to be 'school ready'. Our findings relate to this mission but have the potential to improve policy making and delivery in other areas, now and for future governments.

This paper is the first in the project and reveals which groups are at greatest risk of not being school ready. The next phase of this project will take a deep dive into some of the specific groups we have identified, working closely with those who understand the issues first-hand. By bringing together front-line experience with the Institute's expertise on *how* government works, we aim to show how better policy making can support government to meet its goal of closing the opportunity gap.



Emma Norris, Deputy Director, Institute for Government

Seeking insights into early years development

Our analysis of who is at most risk of not being school ready is the most comprehensive possible using publicly available data. Our findings will no doubt be familiar to those who have deep understanding of the subject. But we know that the insights of people who understand early years development best – practitioners, researchers or those with lived experience – are not always reached by government. We also know how valuable they are.

That is why we want to invite anyone with this experience to work with us, so we can add voice, perspective and lived experience to this analysis. By bringing together on-the-ground insights with our expertise on how government works, we aim to help shape the policy making process so that it delivers for groups who have been persistently under-served.

Please get in touch via the email below or by visiting our [evidence submission webpage](#) to find out more about the project, share evidence or insights that could support our research, including information on any groups that we have missed and may not be visible in the data and literature, or partner with us to develop propositions for reform.

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Introduction

The Starmer government has committed to five long-term missions, including to 'break down barriers to opportunity'. This focus on narrowing inequalities, combined with a mission-led approach, offers the chance to embed approaches and policies that genuinely shift the dial for groups of children that have been persistently 'left behind' in the past.

To deliver on this mission, the government has committed to improve children's early development, setting a target for 75% of children completing reception year to be 'school ready' by the end of the parliament. How this challenge is framed will shape the policy approaches and choices that follow. Much has already been written about the struggles of the early years sector itself, from funding shortfalls and shortages of places to workforce recruitment and retention issues.¹ This paper approaches the subject from a different angle, investigating which groups are at greatest risk of not being school ready.

Our analysis shows deep disparities in school readiness between different demographic groups. These insights will be all too familiar to those with knowledge and expertise in the early years sector² – but are critical for policy makers to understand. Identifying the children at greatest risk of being left out of the opportunity mission, particularly those facing multiple, intersecting disadvantages, will better equip policy makers to deliver on the government's desired long-term impacts.

If the Starmer administration is serious about closing the opportunity gap, it must start by focusing on *who* has been persistently left behind by policy making in this area to date.

Key findings

- **School readiness does not follow a steady downward trend from higher-attaining to lower-attaining groups – there is a cliff-edge.** Four groups of children persistently fall far behind their peers: children eligible for free school meals; children identifying as Gypsy/Roma; Travellers of Irish heritage; and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These inequalities have persisted for over a decade despite successive policy interventions aimed at raising overall attainment levels.
- **The strongest demographic predictors of local authority performance on 'school readiness' are the proportion of children with SEND,** followed by the proportion of children from low-income households (identified through eligibility for free school meals, FSM). These groups are among the most 'left behind' and in areas where they make up a larger share of the population, overall attainment levels tend to be lower.

-
- However, a striking pattern emerges when looking at outcomes *within* these groups. **Children with SEND do better in local areas where there are more of them – and the same is true for children eligible for FSM.** This means that while local authorities with higher proportions of these children have lower *overall* attainment levels, more of these children achieve a good level of development compared to their counterparts in areas where they are fewer in number.
 - **A significant gender gap also exists, with boys falling behind girls** – most notably in lower-attaining groups, where the differences are remarkably large. For instance, around 60% of girls on FSM achieve a good level of development compared to just 43% of boys.

How the government frames its opportunity mission will be key

The government's 75% school readiness target is an opportunity to galvanise productive cross-government action towards a clear, common aim. But targets can have unintended consequences, driving policy makers towards immediate priorities at the expense of a direction that would offer greater long-term benefits. Indeed, there is a risk that government may inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities it is aiming to eliminate: current policies heavily focus on *universal* childcare expansion and improving quality in early years settings, which are not targeted and could benefit children already performing relatively well.

Mission-led government should enable government to embed a different, more strategic approach to policy making. By pairing immediate action to meet the 75% target with a long-term investment in those at greatest risk of poor educational outcomes, the government could lock in lasting benefits – bringing it closer to its goal of closing the opportunity gap.

The government wants 75% of children in England to be 'school ready' by 2028

The government's long-term opportunity mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future success. Early childhood development is crucial to this,³ and the government has committed to set up every child up for the "best start in life".

The *Plan for Change*, outlining Keir Starmer's top priorities for this parliament, states that this will be achieved by delivering "accessible, integrated maternity, baby and family support services through the first 1,001 days of life and high-quality early education and childcare".⁴ The key milestone – one of only six for this parliament – is for 75% of five-year-olds in England to reach a good level of development in Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) assessments by 2028.

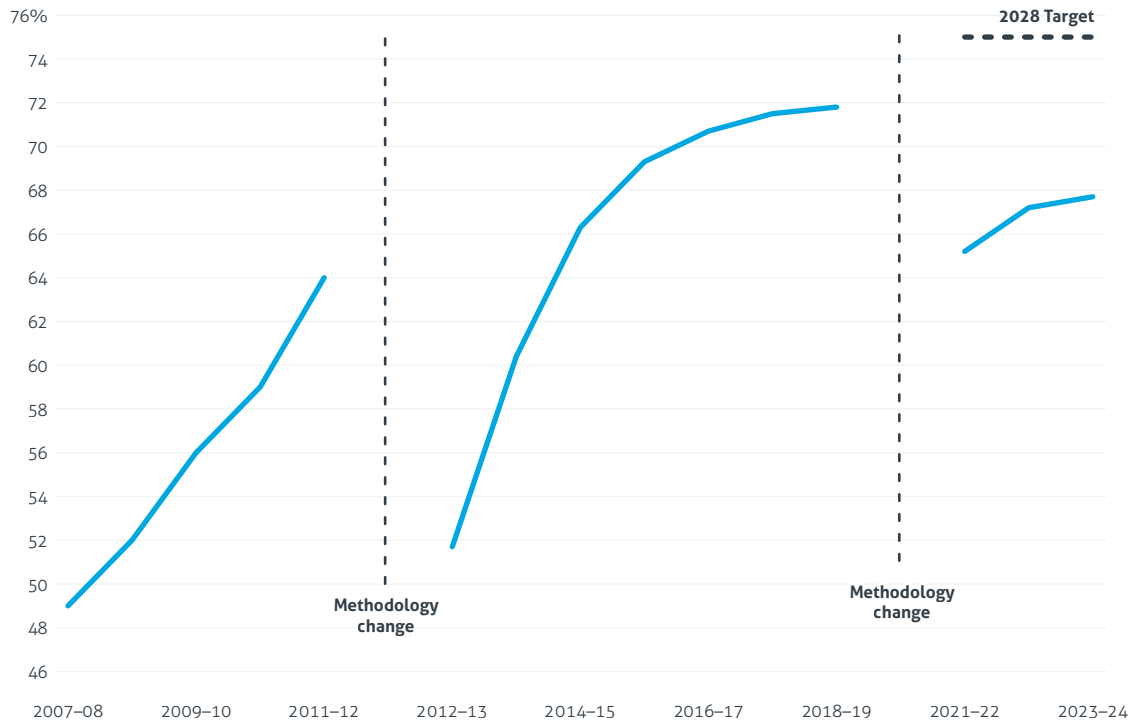
The EYFSP assesses development in areas such as communication, motor skills, social and emotional development, and maths and literacy. To achieve a good level of development (GLD), children must be performing at the expected level across 12 early learning goals covering all of these areas.^{**} Around two thirds of five-year-olds had reached GLD in 2023–24 (67.7%), and the government has said that an additional 40–45,000 children a year will need to reach this level by 2028 for it to hit the 75% target.

This would of course mark an improvement from current levels, but only a slight gain over the pre-pandemic figure of 71.8% in 2018/19 (though these figures are not strictly comparable as the assessment criteria changed from 2021).⁵

* As early education and childcare policies are devolved, the government's focus is on delivering this in England. This paper also focuses on England for this reason.

** These 12 early learning goals are: listening, attention and understanding; speaking; self-regulation (emotional); managing self (independence, knowing right from wrong, managing hygiene and personal needs); building relationships; gross motor skills; fine motor skills; comprehension; word reading; writing; number (comprehension and recall); numerical patterns. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fa42a30536cb92748328f/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_-_based_providers.pdf

Figure 1 **Five-year-olds achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2007–08 to 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2009–2024. Notes: The government changed the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework in September 2012, and again in September 2021. No EYFSP data was collected in 2019–20 and 2020–21. From 2021 onwards, a 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals.

There are significant disparities in school readiness between different groups of children

Our analysis reveals striking disparities in the proportion of children from different demographic groups who achieved GLD in 2023–24. Figure 2 highlights key differences between demographic groups, aggregated at a high level.*

Figure 2 **Five-year-olds achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, by top-level demographic group, 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. The demographic groups listed are not all mutually exclusive. 'Autumn-born' describes children born in September–December, 'Spring-born' describes children born in January–March and 'Summer-born' describes children born in April–August. Deprivation deciles are IDACI, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The bottom decile (1) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the highest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

* It covers the range of demographic characteristics reported in the school and early years censuses, including sex, ethnicity, socio-economic status (measured through eligibility for free school meals and the IDACI index), term of birth and any identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It also includes notable regional differences between London and the rest of the country. Note that many pupils who may later be identified as having SEND during their schooling years may not have a formal diagnosis by age 5, either because a need has not yet been identified or due to waiting times for assessments.

Some demographic groups already have relatively high levels of school readiness – with others close behind

At least 75% of children who do not have any identified SEND are female, autumn-born, living in England’s least deprived neighbourhoods or identify as ethnically Chinese achieved GLD in 2023–24. Though even in these groups, at least a fifth of children were not school ready.

Figure 3 **Demographic groups where at least 75% of five-year-olds are achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Group	Not achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development, % ▼
Minor ethnic group: Chinese	744	2,661	78.1%
Deprivation decile 10	11,076	37,147	77.0%
Autumn-born	51,288	159,289	75.6%
No SEND	126,756	393,067	75.6%
Deprivation decile 9	12,828	38,623	75.1%
Girls	74,062	222,494	75.0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. Demographic groups are not mutually exclusive. 'Autumn-born' describes children born in September–December. Deprivation deciles are IDACI deciles, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The top decile (10) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the lowest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

Some groups just need a small boost to catch up. Between 70 and 75% of children living in deprivation deciles 7 and 8 and children identifying as Indian, Mixed White and Asian or Irish achieved GLD in 2023–24.

Figure 4 **Demographic groups where 70–75% of five-year-olds are achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24.**

Group	Not achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development, %
Minor ethnic group: White and Asian	2,835	8,430	74.8%
Deprivation decile 8	13,967	38,021	73.1%
Minor ethnic group: Irish	394	1,054	72.8%
Deprivation decile 7	15,416	39,217	71.8%
Minor ethnic group: Indian	7,398	18,191	71.1%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: This figure includes demographic groups where more than 70% but fewer than 75% of children are achieving a good level of development. A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. The demographic groups listed are not mutually exclusive. Deprivation deciles are IDACI deciles, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The top decile (10) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the lowest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

Some groups are performing near the national average, while others are further behind – with some falling below a clear 'cliff-edge' in attainment

In 2023–24, some 67.7% of all five-year olds in England achieved GLD. Several groups cluster around this average, with between 60% and 70% of children in each group considered school ready (see Figure 5).

Some groups fall towards the lower end of this spectrum. Boys, summer-born children, those living in more deprived areas (deciles 2–4), those with a first language other than English, or identifying as Asian or Asian British, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British, or Other ethnicity all sit in the roughly 10% grouping below the national average.

Figure 5 **Demographic groups where 60–70% of five-year-olds are achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Group	Not achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development, %
Deprivation decile 6	17,351	40,353	69.9%
First language is English	140,054	321,516	69.7%
Spring-born	43,969	100,022	69.5%
Major ethnic group: Mixed/Multiple	14,000	31,898	69.5%
Major ethnic group: White	127,140	285,879	69.2%
Deprivation decile 5	19,196	41,799	68.5%
Total (all children)	196,591	411,626	67.7%
Major ethnic group: Asian/Asian British	26,041	52,591	66.9%
Deprivation decile 4	22,379	43,195	65.9%
Deprivation decile 3	24,246	42,918	63.9%
First language other than English	46,300	80,435	63.5%
Major ethnic group: Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	13,518	22,374	62.3%
Deprivation decile 2	27,366	44,249	61.8%
Boys	122,529	189,132	60.7%
Major ethnic group: Other	5,539	8,377	60.2%
Summer-born	101,334	152,315	60.0%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. The demographic groups listed are not all mutually exclusive. 'Spring-born' describes children born in September–December and 'Summer-born' describes children born in April–August. Deprivation deciles are IDACI deciles, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The bottom decile (1) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the highest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

Disparities are more pronounced among groups where fewer than 60% of children achieve GLD. There is a 'cliff edge' at ~58%, beyond which four groups fall starkly behind: children eligible for free school meals, then children identifying as Gypsy/Roma, Travellers of Irish heritage, and children with any identified SEND.

Figure 6 **Demographic groups where less than 60% of five-year-olds are achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Group	Not achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development, %
Minor ethnic group: Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	1,699	2,537	59.9%
Deprivation decile 1	32,361	45,425	58.4%
Eligible for free school meals	50,761	53,951	51.5%
Minor ethnic group: Gypsy/Roma	1,426	780	35.4%
Minor ethnic group: Traveller of Irish heritage	405	221	35.3%
Any SEND	63,218	15,465	19.7%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. The demographic groups listed are not mutually exclusive. Deprivation deciles are IDACI deciles, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The bottom decile (1) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the highest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

This development gap has persisted over the last decade and more.⁶ Relative inequalities between children with and without SEND have increased, from a 42 percentage-point (ppt) gap in 2012–13 to a 56ppt gap in 2023–24.⁷ The Education Policy Institute finds that children receiving SEND support fell the equivalent of 0.7 months further behind their peers between 2019 and 2023.⁸ Children on free school meals have been persistently the same amount behind their peers every recorded year from 2011–12 to 2023–24 (between 17 and 20 percentage points fewer children eligible for free school meals achieved GLD every year, compared to all other pupils).⁹

There are significant inequalities in development within the *same* demographic groups too

There is also variation within groups. For example, the percentage of children with SEND who achieve GLD varies significantly depending on their primary need. In 2023/24, over 40% of children with hearing and visual impairments were deemed school ready compared with 10% of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and as low as 0.6% of children diagnosed with severe learning disabilities by this age.*

* Following the DfE's approach, we use the same definition of 'school readiness' for all groups in this paper. We recognise that this is a blunt measure and, in practice, definitions of a 'good level of development' at age 5 could vary depending on children's individual needs.

Figure 7 **Five-year-olds with SEND achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, by primary need, 2023–24**

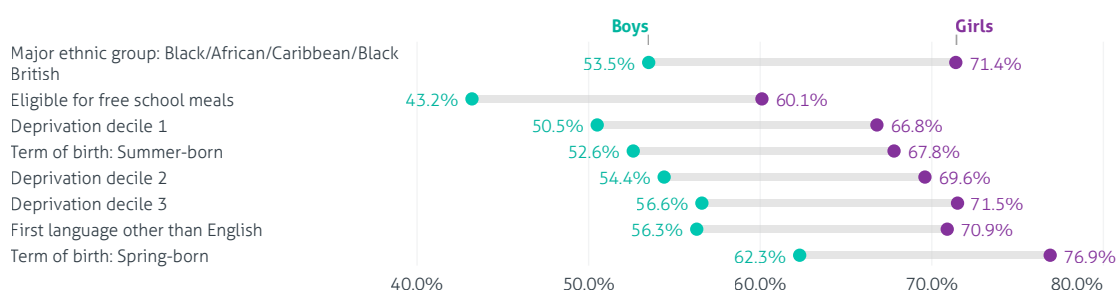
Type of primary need	Not achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development	Achieving a good level of development, %
Visual impairment	269	207	43.5%
Hearing impairment	687	487	41.5%
Unknown	6,617	3,094	31.9%
Physical disability	1,301	511	28.2%
Other difficulty or disability	1,160	434	27.2%
Multi-sensory impairment	181	62	25.5%
Social, emotional and mental health	6,502	2,059	24.1%
SEN support but no specialist assessment of type of need	1,794	512	22.2%
Speech, language and communication needs	33,482	9,290	21.7%
Moderate learning difficulty	2,238	354	13.7%
Specific learning difficulty	1,514	198	11.6%
Autistic spectrum disorder	11,832	1,311	10.0%
Profound and multiple learning difficulties	639	7	1.1%
Severe learning difficulty	1,293	8	0.6%

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. Many children with SEND may not have yet had their needs identified at age 5, and therefore are not represented in this data.

Boys are falling substantially behind girls – most notably in lower attaining groups

In 2023–24, some 60.7% of boys and 75% of girls reached GLD in England. Several groups have large disparities in the proportion of boys and girls who are school ready, with lower readiness levels among boys bringing the group's overall performance significantly below the 67.7% national average (Figure 8). For instance, there is an 18ppt gap in school readiness between boys and girls identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British. Boys eligible for free school meals are particularly far behind – in 2023–24, just 43% were school ready, twice as far away from the government's 75% target as girls in the same group.

Figure 8 Demographic groups with biggest gaps between the proportion of girls and boys achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24

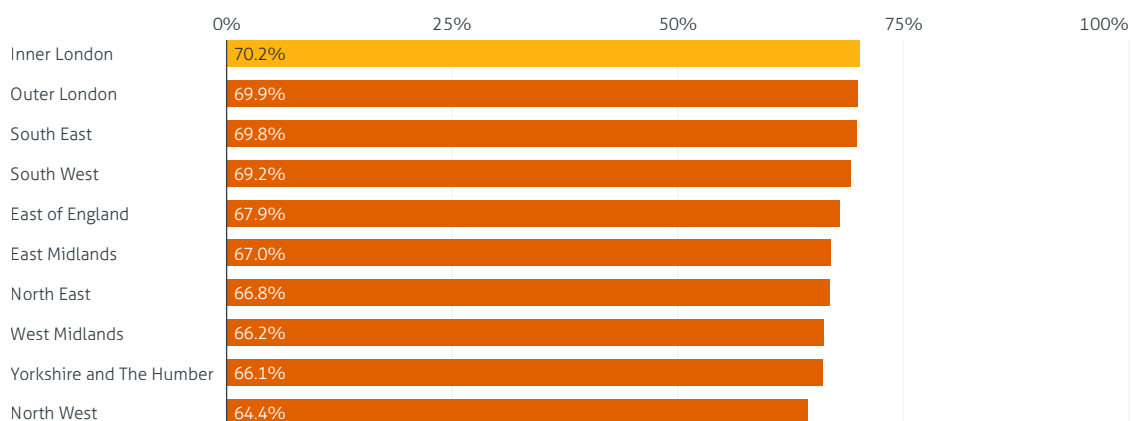


Source:DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes:A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. This visual shows all groups with more than a 14.5 (average) percentage point disparity between boys and girls. The demographic groups listed are not mutually exclusive. 'Spring-born' describes children born in September–December and 'Summer-born' describes children born in April–August. Deprivation deciles are IDACI deciles, calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). The top decile (10) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the lowest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

There is not much difference in children’s development by region overall – but more between the most and least deprived parts of the country

There is a moderate 6ppt gap between the proportion of children achieving GLD in Inner London, where school readiness is highest, and North West England, where it is lowest.

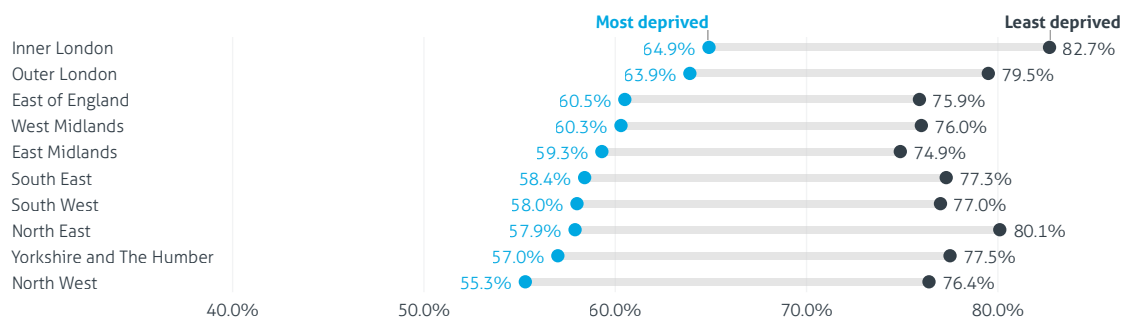
Figure 9 Five-year-olds achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, by region, 2023–24



Source:Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals.

However, there is a 9.6ppt gap between the proportion of children who are school ready and living in neighbourhoods in the bottom national deprivation decile in Inner London and those living in comparable neighbourhoods in the North West. There is also a clearer divide between London and the rest of the country on this measure, with both the most and least deprived neighbourhoods in London outperforming those in other regions – except for the least deprived neighbourhoods in the North East, which achieve similar results to the least deprived neighbourhoods in London.

Figure 10 **Five-year-olds in most and least deprived neighbourhoods achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, by region, 2023–24**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: A 'good level of development' is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals. Most deprived neighbourhoods are those in IDACI decile 1 and least deprived neighbourhoods are those in IDACI decile 10. IDACI deciles are calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within an LSOA (neighbourhood). Decile 10 equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the lowest percentage of children living in income-deprived households.

Inequalities are much wider at a local authority level and linked primarily to the proportion of children with SEND or from low-income households

Only around 60% of children in the lowest-attaining local authorities – like Burnley, Thanet and Salford – are achieving GLD, compared to around 80% in the best-attaining local authorities – like Elmbridge and Waverley, both in Surrey.

We ran multivariate regression analysis to determine which demographic factors best explain differences in school readiness across England's local authorities in 2023–24 (methodology and full results are in the Annex). The strongest predictors of local authority performance on school readiness are the proportion of children with SEND, followed by the proportion of children from low-income households (identified through eligibility for free school meals³).

* The Education Policy Institute has warned that eligibility for free school meals is far from a complete proxy measure for children living in poverty. This is because it has a low-income threshold (children must live in households earning less than £7,400 per year to qualify), eligibility rules do not consider factors like housing costs and family size contributing to poverty, and there is under-registration (especially for younger children). We use it here in the absence of a better viable measure (see Methodology), but recognise that, as a result, our analysis only captures a subset of children living in low-income households. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/who-has-been-registered-for-free-school-meals-and-pupil-premium-in-the-national-pupil-database>

These groups are among the most left behind – beyond the cliff edge identified above. In areas where they make up a larger share of the population, overall attainment levels tend to be lower. The key findings are as follows:

- **Having more children with SEND in a local authority has the largest effect of any of the factors we looked at on school readiness levels.*** For every 10ppt rise in a local authority’s proportion of children with any SEND, the proportion of children starting school ready drops by 3.4ppts.
- **Having more children eligible for free school meals in a local authority also has an effect – albeit lower than the effect of SEND levels.** A 10ppt increase in the proportion of children eligible for free school meals is associated with a 1.9ppt drop in a local authority’s proportion of children who are school ready. Additional analysis on the effect of neighbourhood deprivation found a similar effect.** In short, there is a strong association between low income in local areas and lower levels of school readiness, supporting national trends identified by organisations like Education Policy Institute¹⁰ and Nesta.¹¹

Additionally, a higher proportion of children identifying as Asian/Asian British is associated with a small drop in local school readiness, while a higher proportion of children whose first language is not English is associated with a small rise in school readiness.

Figure 11 **Each 10 additional children in this demographic group, per 100 children, implies:**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: This chart shows the output from a multivariate regression; see methodology for details.

* Excluding 'unknown' categories, which describe effects for only a very small number of children.
 ** We did not include a measure of neighbourhood deprivation in our main regression, as the measure used in the source dataset (IDACI) is calculated according to where children live, not where they go to school like the rest of our variables, and to add several additional variables to the regression would make it difficult to yield precise estimates as the dataset is relatively small. As a robustness check, we ran a second multivariate regression which included these deprivation variables. A 10ppt increase in children living in neighbourhoods in IDACI decile 1 or 2 was associated with a 1.7–1.9ppt fall in school readiness. As this is a similar size to the free school meal effect found in our first regression, we suggest that variation in the proportion of children in low-income households explains these relationships. See methodology for full results.

Additional analysis also shows that the relationships between these key predictive factors (that is, low income and SEND status) and school readiness are much weaker in London than across the rest of the country, but these findings should be interpreted with caution as some of the results are statistically imprecise (see Annex).*

Children with SEND or on free school meals (FSM) do better in areas where there are more of them

A striking pattern emerges when we look at outcomes for these groups in different parts of the country: further regression analysis by IfG found that children with SEND do better in local areas where there are more of them. This could be because local authorities that are better at identifying SEND in young children, pick up on more children with milder needs, who are naturally more likely to achieve GLD. Or it might mean that areas better equipped at identifying SEND are also better at providing the right support, helping more SEND children achieve GLD.

Figure 12 **Each 10 additional children in this demographic group, per 100 children, implies:**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: This chart shows the output from a multivariate regression; see methodology for details.

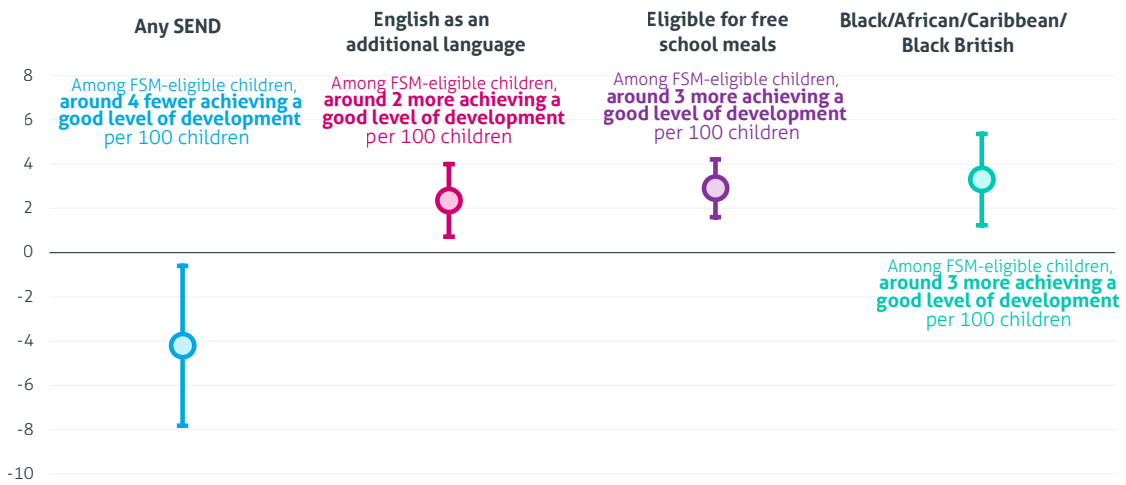
Likewise, children eligible for free school meals (FSM) tend to do better in areas where there are more of them and more children from certain demographic groups - specifically children who identify as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and have a first language other than English (Figure 13). This is counter to received wisdom about the benefits of mixed income groups in a local area for educational performance.¹² It also suggests that areas with a higher concentration of ethnically diverse or disadvantaged populations may have more effective support systems in place to help children from low-income households achieve.

* Forthcoming Institute for Government analysis of how schools' performance at Key Stages 2 and 4 varies across the country finds a similar gap between London and the rest of the country. The authors of that report set out detailed analysis of what might be driving this.

This means that while local authorities with higher proportions of these children tend to have lower overall attainment levels, more of the children in question achieve GLD compared to their counterparts in areas where they are more clearly in a minority. This suggests (though does not prove) that local areas with larger numbers of these children may be better set up to help them achieve.

The same analysis found that increases in the proportion of children with FSM in a local authority are associated with a drop in the proportion of children with SEND who are school ready. This highlights the challenges faced by local areas in supporting children with SEND to achieve GLD while also supporting a higher proportion of children from low-income households.

Figure 13 **Each 10 additional children in this demographic group, per 100 children, implies:**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: This chart shows the output from a multivariate regression; see methodology for details.

The data reveals inequalities between demographic groups, but does not explain their causes

Research shows that differences in children's home and educational environments are linked to these disparities

There is an extensive literature on the factors that affect a child's development that can provide a useful foundation to our findings.*

Birth characteristics (such as when children are born, their sex and disabilities present from birth) and social, cultural and environmental factors play a powerful role in shaping children's outcomes throughout their life. Differences in development outcomes reflect all of these influences, making it difficult to isolate the impact of one specific factor or pinpoint where policy should focus to tackle the most important drivers of inequalities.

It is now well known that recent policy interventions have failed to break the link between inequalities in children's home and education environments and inequalities in development outcomes.

- **Foundations, the What Works Centre for Children and Families**, has identified significant barriers to child development linked to inequalities in early home and education environments. Vulnerable children often face multiple, intersecting challenges.¹³ Their recent Practice Guide supports families experiencing adversity, including poverty, substance misuse, intimate partner violence, conflict in the couple relationship and parental mental health challenges.¹⁴
- **The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Deaton Review** – a major study on inequalities – analysed longitudinal data from children born in 2000–02 and 2010–12. It found that home, education, emotional, and material environment inequalities** explain over 20% of cognitive development and 45% of socio-emotional development gaps by age 3.¹⁵
- **Nesta** analysis found that children living with 'home disadvantage' – characterised by chaotic households, fewer home learning activities, poor parental mental health, parent-child conflict, and/or more authoritarian and/or permissive parenting*** – had weaker socio-emotional and self-regulation skills. Those in low-

* The next phase of the 'Policy making for left-behind groups' series will add to this literature, exploring in greater detail the causes behind the disparities outlined in this paper.

** The IFS measures children's emotional environment through parental mental health, conflict and closeness in parent-child relationships, regularity of bedtimes, and conflict between parents. Children's educational environment is measured via maternal educational qualifications, maternal vocabulary skills, home learning activities, and use of formal childcare. Material environments include housing tenancy and overcrowding.

*** Nesta uses definitions of parenting from Robinson and others, 'Authoritative, Authoritarian, and Permissive Parenting Practices: Development of a New Measure', *Psychological Reports*, 1995, vol. 77, no. 3, pp. 819–830. Authoritative parenting is characterised by high demands and high responsiveness. Authoritarian parenting is characterised by high demands and low responsiveness. Permissive parenting is characterised by low demands and high or low responsiveness. Although it may seem counterintuitive to have a factor with strong loadings of both authoritarian and permissive parenting, Nesta finds that these parenting styles are positively correlated (.451) with each other.

income households showed poorer cognitive skills.* Children who experienced both challenges had significantly worse outcomes across both cognitive and socio-emotional measures compared to those who experienced neither.¹⁶

- The **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)** along with major longitudinal studies – including the government-commissioned **EPPSE** (Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education) and **SEED** (Study of Early Education and Development) studies – highlight the strong benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE), especially for socio-economically disadvantaged children.^{17,18,19} However, if parents are not eligible for government-funded childcare or face challenges finding childcare options that accommodate non-standard work hours, their children may miss out on early education opportunities until the universal entitlements begin at age 3. The EYFSP data does not reveal which children attended an ECE setting before starting reception or how much this influences variations in outcomes.

Factors not at the forefront of the data or literature may also play an important role

There are several characteristics of children that are not visible in the data – nor extensively explored in the literature. For example, we do not know how many five-year-olds in the data:

- were born **pre-term or had a low birth weight**. There is international evidence that both can have negative effects on school grades, especially for those born extremely pre-term (less than 28 weeks gestation).²⁰
- are **children in the care of local authorities**. Children in this group are twice as likely to have a special educational need than the overall pupil population and tend to perform worse than their peers at Key Stages 2 and 4.²¹ These children may already be falling behind in reception, highlighting the need for early interventions to support their progress throughout school.²²

These are just two examples of groups that may be missed by this analysis, but at risk of poorer educational outcomes.

* Low-income households are defined by Nesta as children with parents in receipt of at least one of a predefined list of benefits, or with household gross earnings of less than £16,190. Cognitive skills were measured through verbal and picture tests, and the ability to choose and persist with tasks.

Understanding *who* is at greatest risk of falling behind is a necessary first step to developing better approaches to policy making

As outlined at the start, how a challenge is framed will shape the policy approaches and choices that follow. But even when we know who government needs to support most, there are no quick fixes and often limited political incentives to focus on groups that are costly to serve and require long-term interventions that go beyond a single parliamentary cycle. The complex, intersecting issues certain groups face are too often pushed into the ‘too hard’ category – resulting in policy neglect that stores up even more costly and difficult problems for future administrations.

But prevention is possible and there are examples of success in the UK’s own recent history.* The government should learn from these as it approaches its five long-term missions. It has a crucial chance to take a different approach to the process of making policy – by both learning from the past and trialling new approaches – so that it genuinely shifts the dial for groups that have persistently experienced poorer outcomes.

Supporting children most at risk of falling behind will help Labour enhance ‘opportunity for all’

Universal support has increasingly replaced targeted schemes under recent governments

Despite some groups of children persistently falling behind their peers, recent government policy has prioritised universal childcare entitlements while reducing targeted support. Since 2010, early years policy has largely focused on expanding childcare provision to support more parents into employment. In 2017, the government introduced 30 hours of funded childcare for working parents or carers of three- and four-year olds. In 2024, the Sunak government began extending eligibility to younger children. By September 2025, all children from nine months to school-age will be eligible for 30 hours of funded childcare.²³

Real-terms government spending on funded childcare hours more than tripled from £1.2 billion in 2001/02 to £4.2bn in 2023/24, and is set to double to £8.5bn in 2026/7.²⁴ For three- and four-year-olds, this has primarily expanded access to government-funded childcare, rather than increasing funding for providers per childcare hour. Once rising provider costs are taken into account,** the IFS estimates that providers’ core resources per hour for three- and four-year-olds will be 15% lower in real terms in 2024–25 than in 2012–13.²⁵

* In a series of case studies published this spring, the Institute for Government will explore what lessons the new government can learn from the experiences of the last Labour administration. The first case study in this series will explore how the last Labour government tackled absence from school.

** This includes staff costs (affected by minimum wage rises), food, rent and utilities.

The Public Accounts Committee has also highlighted that the early years pupil premium* is significantly lower than the rate for primary school pupils, despite its proven value.²⁶ With no ring-fencing, nearly 50% of school leaders report using it to cover budget gaps, reducing targeted support for disadvantaged pupils.²⁷ Overall, policy shifts during this period have redirected funding toward working parents broadly, reducing support targeted at low-income families and households.²⁸

At the same time, successive governments have reduced welfare entitlements. Low-income families have been particularly affected by the benefit cap (introduced in 2013, with real-terms cuts every year in the following decade),²⁹ the phasing out of the family element in Universal Credit (from 2017),³⁰ Local Housing Allowance freezes (frequent since 2011),³¹ and the two-child benefit limit.³²

Early years support services have also been scaled back. Sure Start funding peaked at over £2bn (2022/23 prices) in 2009/10, supporting 3,000 centres.³³ In April 2011, the government removed the ring-fence around this funding, and local authorities redistributed it to firefight acute demand in other areas. By 2022/23 local authority expenditure was an arresting 77.4% lower in real terms than in 2009–10, causing 730 centres to close (a drop of 20.3%) and a paring back of services in the remaining centres.³⁴

There is now extensive evidence that these centres played a critical role in children's early development and parental engagement, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods. IFS analysis has shown that the centres led to fewer hospitalisations at age 11 and 15,³⁵ better academic performance,³⁶ earlier identification of SEND,³⁷ lower youth criminal convictions and custodial sentences, and savings in children's social care.³⁸

The combined focus on universal childcare entitlements, reducing welfare support and targeted funding, and rationalising early years services has not alleviated persistently high inequalities in children's home, educational, emotional and material environments.³⁹

The Starmer government is continuing to expand access to childcare and widening its focus to support more children to be school ready

The Department for Education (DfE) is prioritising three key areas to achieve the school readiness milestone by 2028. These are:

- **Expanding access to government-funded childcare** to encourage more children to benefit from early years education, building on the reforms introduced by the previous government.⁴⁰ This includes supporting 3,000 new and expanded school-based nurseries.
- **Driving up standards in early childhood settings** by increasing the early years pupil premium (EYPP), improving the curriculum and teaching standards, offering sustained professional development for staff, rolling out early years practice hubs⁴¹ and implementing evidence-based maths and literacy interventions.

* Pupil Premium is additional funding to support the attainment of disadvantaged children.

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- **Strengthening and joining up family services** to improve support through pregnancy and early childhood. This includes continuing the roll out of 'family hubs'* across the country, and delivering 'test and learn' pilots planned in Sheffield and Manchester to maximise their effectiveness.^{42,43} It also includes improving early identification of SEND and investing in additional prevention activity through Family Help.⁴⁴

Apart from the EYPP boost and commitment to improve early identification of SEND, these policies are universal rather than targeted at specific groups.

The government's approach could raise overall attainment levels, but may inadvertently widen – rather than narrow – the opportunity gap

The government's 75% school readiness target is the key milestone for its mission to enhance opportunity for all, and one of only six top delivery priorities for this parliament. This is a welcome move – it sends a clear signal that child development is a national priority and creates a powerful platform for long-term action. The Institute for Government has long supported the use of targets to galvanise productive cross-government action towards a clear, common aim.⁴⁵

However, we also recognise that targets can have unintended consequences, driving policy makers towards immediate priorities at the expense of a direction that would offer more long-term benefits.⁴⁶ The key risk is that government reinforces the very inequalities it is aiming to eliminate. Current policies – which are universal by design – may primarily benefit children already exceeding or close to developmental benchmarks, leaving others further behind.

Simply put, overall attainment levels may rise, but so may the gap between higher and lower attaining groups.⁴⁷

We can illustrate this with a simple thought experiment using 2023–24 data. That year, an extra 44,537 children needed to reach GLD for 75% of children to be school ready. How this target is met matters. For example, the government could have reached this goal by improving development outcomes for children in less deprived areas (deprivation deciles 6–8), with 38% more achieving GLD. But this would have meant 99% of children living in these areas were school ready, while only 58% of children living in the most deprived areas (deprivation decile 1) met the same standard – widening the gap.

Similarly, the target could have been met if just 13% more children *not* eligible for free school meals achieved GLD in 2023–24. However, this would have left children eligible for FSM further behind, with 81% of children not eligible for FSM achieving GLD, compared to 51.5% of children eligible for FSM.

* Family hubs were introduced by the previous Conservative government and bring together different services in a 'one-stop shop' to make it easier for families to get the help they need.

The mission-led approach provides an opportunity to focus on those who have been persistently left behind and lock in long-term benefits

Some disparities at age 5 may diminish over time naturally – for example, the gap between educational outcomes for summer- and autumn-born children narrows substantially over the course of their schooling.^{48,49} But those left furthest behind at age 5 often remain behind later on.^{50,51} Children eligible for free school meals, with special educational needs or identifying as Travellers of Irish heritage, Gypsy or Roma fare worse at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 than their peers.^{52,53} These groups are also disproportionately likely to experience higher school absence rates.⁵⁴

Likewise, where children face multiple, intersecting disadvantages – such as being from a low-income household with poor parental mental health and having SEND – they are more likely to be at the sharp end of persistent inequalities and face increased risk of long-term social and economic challenges.^{55,56}

The costs of inaction can be huge. Neglecting to address the complex needs these 'left behind' groups face increases the risk of poor long-term outcomes for individuals such as higher school absence rates, reduced employment prospects, poor mental health, addiction and a higher likelihood of being involved in crime.^{57,58,59} This contributes to long-running inter-generational inequality and creates more complex and costly problems for the country in the future.

The government has an opportunity – through the mission-led approach – to prioritise a wider and more co-ordinated set of policies that avoid widening gaps in the short-term while securing long-term benefits for babies and young children most at risk of being left behind. This first requires a clear understanding of who is at most at risk and a deeper understanding of the factors that drive poor long-term outcomes. No single policy lever will be able to truly shift the dial for these groups.

Education policies tend to focus on those just about to enter or already in the school system.⁶⁰ However, attainment levels hide much bigger challenges that stem from the intersection of multiple sources of disadvantage that are often entrenched *before* a child starts school. Early intervention is key and cannot be done by one department alone. Often different parts of government – from DfE to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) – find they are looking at improving outcomes for the same children, but from a different perspective. This can make it challenging for local authorities who are responsible for delivering reforms on the ground, and indeed for the families themselves. Siloed processes and decision making make it harder to access the comprehensive support services they need.

The government now has a critical opportunity to maximise the benefits of its mission-led approach by pairing immediate action on near-term targets with efforts to strengthen the foundations for longer term change, particularly for groups often left behind. This will require a sharper focus on evidence-based policy interventions before children enter early years education – for instance, working across all missions to support babies and very young children, where the foundations of inequality are laid.

There is strong evidence that the earliest years, from pre-conception and pregnancy to age two, are the most pivotal stages for shaping a child's social, cognitive and economic trajectory and levelling the playing field for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁶¹ Early interventions that address the broader determinants of a child's attainment – such as parental mental health, housing and household income – offer the greatest potential to prevent costly problems in the future.^{62,63}

Conclusion

If the government is serious about closing the early years attainment gap, its mission-led approach provides an ideal vehicle to drive both short-term results and longer term gains. It should build on the momentum created by the school readiness target and use it as a foundation to improve policy making so it can better reach the most left-behind groups. This would not only demonstrate the effectiveness of mission-led government, but also set an entire generation up for success in education and beyond.

Annex

Methodology

For this paper, we conducted multivariate analysis on the Department for Education, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. DfE collects these results from local authorities, including state-funded schools and private, voluntary and independent providers (including childminders) as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) return. DfE then matches this data to other data sources, including the school and early years censuses, to obtain information on pupil characteristics.

The dataset for this analysis covers all local authorities in England. The City of London and Isles of Scilly were excluded, because they have small populations, which we would expect to skew results if included.

List of dependent variables used in multivariate regression analysis

Type of variable	Variable	Where included
Term of birth	Autumn-born	All regressions
Term of birth	Summer-born	All regressions
Sex	Male	All regressions
SEN	Unknown SEN	All regressions
SEN	Any SEN	All regressions
Major ethnic group	Asian/Asian British	All regressions
Major ethnic group	Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	All regressions
Major ethnic group	Other ethnic group	All regressions
Major ethnic group	Unknown ethnic group	All regressions
Major ethnic group	Black/African/Caribbean/ Black British	All regressions
Free school meals	Eligible for free school meals	All regressions
Free school meals	Unknown free school meal eligibility	All regressions
First language	First language other than English	All regressions
First language	Unknown first language	All regressions
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 1	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 2	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 3	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 4	Robustness check

Type of variable	Variable	Where included
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 5	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 6	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 7	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 8	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 9	Robustness check
Deprivation decile	IDACI decile 10	Robustness check

Explanation of approach taken

Our main results are based on multivariate linear regressions in 2023–24, covering all available demographic variables (as reported in the EYFSP results). We did not include a measure of neighbourhood deprivation in our main regression, as the measure used in the source dataset (IDACI) is calculated according to where children live, not where they go to school, like the rest of our variables, and to add several additional variables to the regression would make it difficult to yield precise estimates as the dataset is relatively small. As a robustness check, we ran an additional multivariate regression that included these deprivation variables.

Interpretation and presentation

This analysis controls for as many demographic variables as the data allows, but it is possible that other variables not measured in this dataset – such as variation in children’s home environments – drive the results we observe. As a result, the regressions should be interpreted as a description of the observed relationship between demographic factors and school readiness, rather than causal relationships.

Full results

In each subsection below, we present full results from the multivariate regressions we conducted.

Drivers of local authority variation in school readiness

In this analysis, we looked at which demographic variables best predict local authority variation in the percentage of children who achieve a good level of development. Results from our main regression are presented in Table 1. Results from our robustness check are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 **Drivers of local authority variation in children achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with unknown SEN	-1.459 ***	0.446
Share of children with any SEN	-0.338 ***	0.105
Share of children eligible for free school meals	-0.198 ***	0.038
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	0.460 **	0.198
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.120 ***	0.037
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.154 *	0.079
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	-0.090	0.103
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	0.117	0.178
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	-0.017	0.060
Share of children with first language other than English	0.133 ***	0.048
Share of children with unknown first language	-0.019	0.134
Share of children who are autumn-born	0.320	0.261
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.244	0.246
Share of children who are boys	-0.336 *	0.179
(Intercept)	90.570 ***	19.535
Adjusted R-squared	0.537	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, and children with English as a first language. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 2 **Drivers of local authority variation in children achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, with additional neighbourhood deprivation measures, 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with any SEN	-0.315 ***	0.107
Share of children with unknown SEN	-1.136 **	0.449
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	0.416 **	0.200
Share of children eligible for free school meals	-0.064	0.056
Share of children in deprivation decile 1	-0.185 ***	0.061
Share of children in deprivation decile 2	-0.171 ***	0.067
Share of children in deprivation decile 9	-0.227 **	0.092
Share of children in deprivation decile 6	-0.183 **	0.091
Share of children in deprivation decile 4	-0.185 **	0.092
Share of children in deprivation decile 8	-0.128 *	0.083
Share of children in deprivation decile 7	-0.090	0.089
Share of children in deprivation decile 10	-0.019	0.064
Share of children in deprivation decile 3	-0.009	0.072
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.108 ***	0.038
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	-0.100	0.102
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.067	0.084
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	0.125	0.182
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	0.017	0.069
Share of children with first language other than English	0.101 **	0.049
Share of children with unknown first language	-0.103	0.134
Share of children who are autumn-born	0.505 *	0.269
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.076	0.240
Share of children who are boys	-0.256	0.176
(Intercept)	83.546 ***	20.021
Adjusted R-squared	0.584	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, children living in neighbourhoods in deprivation decile 5, and children with English as a first language. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Drivers of local authority variation in school readiness in London compared to the rest of the country

We also separated the dataset into London and the rest of the country and repeated the main regression to test if the findings were different. These results are presented in Table 3 and 4 respectively. Note that many of the findings for London are not statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), likely due to a small sample.

Table 3 **Drivers of local authority variation in children achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, London, 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with any SEN	-0.157	0.224
Share of children with unknown SEN	-0.331	0.836
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	1.716 **	0.664
Share of children eligible for free school meals	-0.030	0.099
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	-0.319 **	0.151
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.143 *	0.078
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	-0.372	0.232
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	-0.077	0.083
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	0.258	0.372
Share of children with unknown first language	-1.254 *	0.664
Share of children with first language other than English	0.052	0.074
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.836	0.512
Share of children who are autumn-born	-0.155	0.528
Share of children who are boys	-1.07 **	0.475
(Intercept)	175.463 ***	42.277
Adjusted R-squared	0.483	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, and children with English as a first language. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 4 **Drivers of local authority variation in children achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, England (excluding London), 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with any SEN	-0.397 ***	0.115
Share of children with unknown SEN	-0.978	0.651
Share of children eligible for free school meals	-0.141 ***	0.045
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	0.658 **	0.318
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.1 **	0.046
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	-0.384	0.265
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.137	0.104
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	-0.115	0.098
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	-0.103	0.193
Share of children with first language other than English	0.081	0.072
Share of children with unknown first language	0.054	0.130
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.336	0.275
Share of children who are autumn-born	0.241	0.296
Share of children who are boys	-0.414 **	0.187
(Intercept)	101.648 ***	22.742
Adjusted R-squared	0.566	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, and children with English as a first language. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Drivers of local authority variation in school readiness for children eligible for free school meals

We also looked at which demographic variables best predict local authority variation in the percentage of children eligible for free school meals who achieve a good level of development. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 **Drivers of local authority variation in children eligible for free school meals achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with any SEN	-0.421 **	0.184
Share of children with unknown SEN	-0.327	0.780
Share of children eligible for free school meals	0.291 ***	0.067
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	0.737 **	0.347
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	0.33 ***	0.105
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	-0.353 *	0.180
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	-0.242 *	0.139
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.042	0.065
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	-0.060	0.312
Share of children with first language other than English	0.236 ***	0.084
Share of children with unknown first language	-0.285	0.235
Share of children who are autumn-born	-0.395	0.457
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.152	0.430
Share of children who are boys	0.034	0.313
(Intercept)	65.861 *	34.198
Adjusted R-squared	0.526	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, and children with English as a first language. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Drivers of local authority variation in school readiness for children with SEND

We also looked at which demographic variables best predict local authority variation in the percentage of children with SEND who achieve a good level of development. Results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 **Drivers of local authority variation in children with SEN achieving a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, 2023–24**

Variables	Coefficient	Standard error
Share of children with any SEN	1.109 ***	0.067
Share of children with unknown SEN	-1.071	0.347
Share of children eligible for free school meals	-0.243 ***	0.105
Share of children with unknown free school meals eligibility	0.728 **	0.084
Share of children identifying as Asian/Asian British	-0.093	0.184
Share of children identifying as other ethnic group	0.172	0.065
Share of children identifying as unknown ethnic group	-0.090	0.430
Share of children identifying as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	-0.030	0.312
Share of children identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0.011	34.198
Share of children with first language other than English	0.083	0.235
Share of children with unknown first language	0.181	0.780
Share of children who are summer-born	-0.417	0.457
Share of children who are autumn-born	0.057	0.313
Share of children who are boys	-0.311	0.139
(Intercept)	39.083	0.180
Adjusted R-squared	0.366	

Source: Institute for Government analysis of DfE, 'Early years foundation stage profile results', 2023–24. Notes: One variable in each type of demographic group was excluded to reduce multicollinearity. Excluded variables were: children with no SEN, girls, Spring-born children, children identifying as White, and children with English as a first language. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

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