

# Policy making blind spots

Why some children are left behind from the start



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# About this report

This report looks at five systemic policy making failures that lead to some groups being left behind at age 5, in the context of the Labour government's opportunity mission.

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# Introduction

## Some children face wide, persistent opportunity gaps at age five

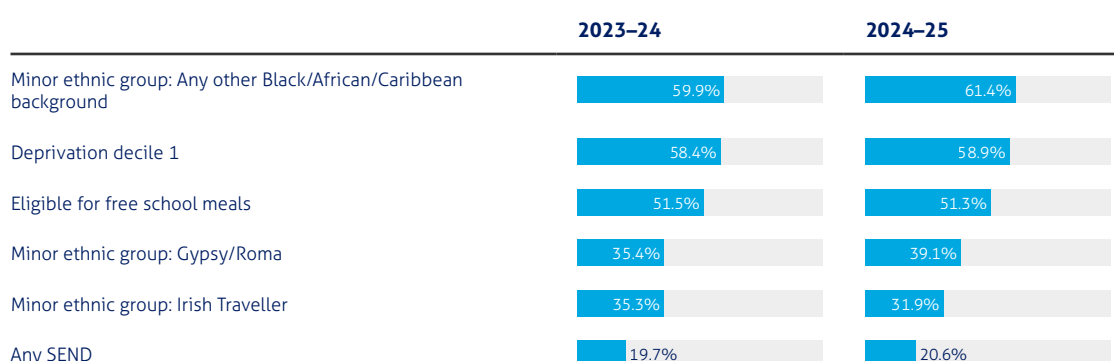
The Labour government’s opportunity mission aims to ‘close the opportunity gap’ by breaking the link between a child’s background and their future success. Its milestone target is for 75% of children completing reception year to attain a ‘good level of development’ – or be ‘school ready’ – by 2028.<sup>1</sup>

Institute for Government analysis of five-year-olds’ performance in teacher-led assessments\* in 2023–24 shows that school readiness does not follow a steady downward trend from higher-attaining to lower-attaining groups – there is a cliff edge.<sup>2</sup> Four groups of children persistently fall far behind their peers:

- children eligible for free school meals
- children identifying as Gypsy/Roma
- children identifying as Irish Travellers
- children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

These inequalities have persisted for more than a decade – and remained consistent in 2024–25 (see Figure 1) – despite successive policy interventions that have raised overall attainment levels.

Figure 1 **Demographic groups where fewer than 60% of five-year-olds are achieving a good level of development at early years foundation stage, 2023–24 and 2024–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, ‘Early years foundation stage profile results’, 2023–25. Notes: A ‘good level of development’ is defined as performing at the expected level in 12 specified early learning goals. The demographic groups listed in the figure are not mutually exclusive. Deprivation deciles are deciles from the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), calculated based on the percentage of children living in income-deprived households within a lower super output area (neighbourhood). The bottom decile (1) equates to the 10% of neighbourhoods nationally with the highest percentage of children living in income-deprived households. The table only includes groups where fewer than 60% children reached a ‘good level of development’ in either 2023–24 or 2024–25.

\* These assessments are the early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP). 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, children must be performing at the expected level across 12 early learning goals covering all of these areas.

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These early attainment gaps matter in the longer term: they constrain children’s life chances and perpetuate disadvantage in education, health and employment. For instance, Institute for Government analysis shows that only two in five boys from low-income families reach a good level of development by the end of reception year – inequalities that are mirrored at every major stage of their schooling.<sup>3</sup> As adults, they are less likely to be in secure employment than their peers, more likely to face poor health outcomes and experience more contact with the criminal justice system. The costs are huge – for individuals, families, communities and the state – and cut across at least four of the government’s five missions, including its principal goal of boosting growth.

## How did we get here?

Some attainment gaps are inevitable in a diverse society, reflecting both structural and socio-economic factors, as well as children’s individual developmental trajectories. No government could fully eradicate attainment gaps, but they can be narrowed. The Labour government has committed itself to doing so, and history shows it is possible: some attainment gaps were starting to narrow in the UK before progress stalled and began to reverse in 2017,<sup>\*</sup> and comparable countries such as Denmark and Finland achieve much narrower gaps today.<sup>4,5</sup>

This report explores what it is about the way government works that has allowed inequalities to persist and, in some cases, deepen. It draws on interviews with current and former central government policy makers, place-based leaders, sector bodies, charities, early years providers and academics. We find that early attainment gaps exemplify a type of policy issue that governments of all stripes find particularly difficult to make progress on – sometimes known as ‘wicked’ issues: issues that are complex, long term and politically thorny, with a contested evidence base and high resource cost.<sup>6</sup>

## Five systemic policy making failures hold back progress

Our core conclusion is that, when the UK government collides with a ‘wicked’ issue like this, limited progress – in this case, the opportunity gap observed in the 2023–24 early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) data – can be traced back to several common systemic policy making failures, present across successive governments. We summarise these below.

### 1. There are limited political incentives to prioritise disadvantaged children

Whatever ministers’ political principles and desired policy outcomes are, the electoral cycle inevitably shapes their decision making. There are limited political incentives to focus on long-term solutions that could meaningfully narrow the opportunity gap at age five. Political short-termism, coupled with fiscal pressures and limited advocacy and power for disadvantaged groups, creates low pressure for change.

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\* But even at its narrowest in the past 13 years (in 2016–17), 17 percentage points fewer children eligible for free school meals achieved a good level of development at the end of reception year than their peers from higher-income households (see The Sutton Trust, ‘General election policy briefing: inequality in early years education’, January 2024, [www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inequality-in-early-years-education.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inequality-in-early-years-education.pdf)).

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## **2. The primary focus of early years policy has been to expand childcare entitlements, leaving comparably less funding for child development and tackling inequalities**

Successive ministers – seeking to boost economic growth and meet demand for childcare – have directed the bulk of the limited early years funding envelope towards expanding government-funded childcare for working parents. This excludes families on the lowest incomes who are not in work. Spending on other policy goals, such as improving the quality of early education and family support services, has been comparatively lower in recent times, despite their proven benefits for child development, especially for the most disadvantaged children.

## **3. Successive governments have not stewarded the childcare market well enough for quality and better outcomes**

The government funds a large proportion of early years provision but has not stewarded\* the childcare market well enough to deliver quality and inclusive provision. In the absence of stronger oversight, the market has become oriented towards meeting demand at scale rather than delivering on early education and child development goals. While many large, multi-chain providers are committed to offering high-quality experiences, they must also remain commercially viable. This has contributed to a set of market failures:

- Childcare providers tend to gravitate to areas where parents can pay more, leaving more deprived areas with lower-quality provision, or even 'childcare deserts'.<sup>7</sup>
- Financial pressures appear to be worsening the availability of childcare places for children with SEND.<sup>8</sup>
- Quality is highly variable, with limited safeguards to prevent childcare settings (even if only a minority) from putting profit above quality.<sup>9</sup>

These market failures risk deepening early educational inequalities and, more broadly, delivering poor value for money – as has occurred in other public service markets such as adult social care.<sup>10</sup>

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\* As set out in previous Institute for Government research, market stewardship involves government action to ensure public service markets deliver value for money and the long-term outcomes that policy makers want. It involves policy makers: engaging closely with service users, provider organisations and other interested parties across the system to understand needs, objectives and enablers of successful delivery; setting the 'rules of the game' and allowing providers and service users to respond to the incentives this creates; constantly monitoring the ways in which the market is developing and how providers are responding to these rules, and the actions of other providers; and adjusting the rules of the game in an attempt to steer the system to achieve their high-level aims (see Gash T, Panchamia N, Sims S and Hotson L, *Making Public Service Markets Work*, Institute for Government, 2013, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Making\\_public\\_service\\_markets\\_work\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Making_public_service_markets_work_final_0.pdf)).

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#### **4. Siloed and vertical accountability structures make it hard to implement joined-up approaches that tackle the root causes of inequalities**

Cross-government co-ordination has always been hard: departments tend to prioritise the issues they have direct control over and are held accountable for. The Labour government's missions approach, the explicit aim of which is to encourage more joined-up working across silos, has yet to have any obvious impact on this problem. Without cross-government collaboration, policy more often responds to symptoms rather than root causes.

The drivers of early childhood development inequalities – from poverty and insecure housing to neighbourhood deprivation and poor mental health – are complex, interconnected and take time to meaningfully shift. The policy levers with the greatest impact on these factors, including those with a significant impact on children's home and community environments, are distributed across government, with no clear accountability structures for ensuring departments (other than the Department for Education) are incentivised to deliver policies and services that address the root causes of early attainment gaps.

#### **5. Central government's pragmatic approach to managing complexity comes with trade-offs: missed opportunities and a disconnect with the front line**

Central government officials operate under several pressures stemming from the factors mentioned above, which limit their room for manoeuvre. These pressures, combined with a Whitehall tendency to 'control' complexity and implement policies that deliver value for money against certain metrics, have encouraged certain ways of working. These include:

- setting national targets
- standardising the curriculum and assessment process
- prioritising evidence-based interventions in schools that target specific developmental needs rather than their root causes.

This approach has trade-offs: missed opportunities for flexibility and innovation at the front line (on top of existing policies and initiatives), and gaps in understanding between central government and the people responsible for delivery. From a central government perspective, their approach is pragmatic and offers value for money – given the constraints and trade-offs government faces. But practitioners see it as detached from the realities of the children and families they serve, especially those who are most disadvantaged. The risk is a growing and persistent disconnect between central government and those on the front line – with the latter calling for more holistic approaches, such as Sure Start<sup>11,12</sup> and Total Place,<sup>13,14</sup> which have previously been effective in improving outcomes for groups at risk of poorer outcomes.

These dynamics – present across successive administrations – have contributed to some children being 'left behind', or under-served, from the start. These children experience persistent and wide attainment gaps relative to their peers.

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## The Labour government aims to change course, but risks repeating systemic policy making failures

This report primarily focuses on the factors that contributed to attainment inequalities in the 2023–24 early years foundation stage, focusing on systemic policy making failures under successive governments. The current government has said that it wants to narrow the opportunity gap and ensure that thousands more children attain a good level of development by age five. The Best Start in Life strategy, published in July 2025, outlines how the government intends to achieve its ambition. This includes:

- expanding government-funded childcare entitlements
- setting up a new Best Start Family Service
- having ‘best start family hubs’ in every local authority
- introducing new statutory ‘good level of development’ targets for each local authority.<sup>15</sup>

The need is pressing. The latest early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) results, for 2024–25, show that the ‘cliff edge’ in attainment levels at age five has not improved (see Figure 1), leaving the government fewer than four years to drive substantial improvement within this parliament.

Chapters 1 to 5 provide a more detailed account of each of the policy making failures described above, each concluding by comparing the current government’s approach to its predecessors’. Finally, Chapter 6 provides an assessment of how effective the government has been so far in overcoming the systemic ‘blind spots’ that successive governments have faced.

In summary, the government has made some important shifts:

- It has made **disadvantaged children a focus of policy making** by making the early years the cornerstone of its opportunity mission and introducing targeted interventions to support children at risk of poor outcomes.
- Although the lion’s share of spending is still directed at the childcare expansion, the government has placed **greater emphasis on the quality of early years education and tackling entrenched inequalities** – for example, by rolling out family hubs across England and incentivising more early years teachers to work in deprived areas.
- In its Best Start in Life strategy, **the government has committed itself to more actively shaping the early years market to deliver better outcomes** – a ‘market steward’ role that the Institute for Government first recommended more than a decade ago.<sup>16</sup>

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- In theory, the opportunity mission offers a framework for **better co-ordinating departments' work around the common goal of narrowing educational inequalities**, starting in children's earliest years.

However, long-running systemic problems continue to hamper policy making processes – and the government's explicit goal to improve child development and narrow inequalities. Short-termism (exemplified by the government's 2028 milestone target for 75% of five-year-olds to be 'school ready'), the comparably low budget available for the early years in the context of wider fiscal pressures and poor cross-government co-ordination (despite the missions rhetoric) continue to hold policy making back, increasing the risk of leaving some groups behind.

Central government has continued to adopt a centralised, standardised and universal approach to early years policy. This makes practical sense in a constrained fiscal environment, but crowds out tailored, locally rooted initiatives that may be more effective in shifting the dial for the most left-behind groups. It also has further to go in alleviating the disconnect with front-line public services, noted above. This is a critical delivery challenge as the government presses ahead with implementation of its Best Start in Life strategy and ambitious target of ensuring 75% of children are 'school ready' by 2028.

### **Laying the groundwork for medium- and long-term reform**

The policy making failures set out in this report are not the fault of any single individual or organisation. People across the system – in central government, local authorities, schools, early years settings and front-line services – are doing their best with the resources and levers available to them. But the cumulative result is a system that leaves some children behind from the start.

This report concludes with a call for those who can see opportunities for medium- to long-term change to get in touch. We are keen to discuss how decision and policy making processes can be redesigned to deliver a step change in outcomes for children who are left behind, or under-served, by policy making from the start.

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# 1. There is little political incentive to prioritise disadvantaged children

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**Summary:** Whatever ministers' political principles and desired policy outcomes are, the electoral cycle inevitably shapes their decision making. There are limited political incentives to focus on long-term solutions that could meaningfully narrow the opportunity gap at age five. Political short-termism, coupled with fiscal pressures and limited advocacy and power for disadvantaged groups, create low pressure for change.

## Short-termism creates incentives for 'quick wins'

Short-termism is a perpetual challenge for effective policy making. Politicians – of all stripes – reach for narrow, measurable targets that they can show progress against before the next general election. Ministers often want to 'make their mark' during their typically short tenure,\* and even when they do set long-term goals, they struggle to focus on them amid constant public and media pressure to firefight immediate problems or manage high-profile crises. Meanwhile, they are always operating under the imminent threat of a reshuffle. As Kenneth Clarke put it: "After two years, you are sitting in control now, behind your desk, where you are really going to do this, this and this. And then the phone rings and the prime minister is having a reshuffle."<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty, for ministers, of setting and sticking to long-term goals is reinforced by the public's impatience for tangible improvements in their day-to-day lives. A recent study found that UK citizens generally define the 'short term' as one to three years and the 'long term' as only five to ten years. While there may appear to be support for long-term investment, 'a shorter-term meaning of long term' often shapes this. Costly interventions whose benefits may not be felt for decades – particularly beyond 20 years – struggle to gain public backing.<sup>2</sup> The result is a strong bias towards short- and medium-term policies, with people and policy areas that require sustained, holistic interventions to experience better outcomes, left comparatively behind.

These incentives have already shaped the Starmer government's opportunity mission. Hitting the school readiness milestone will require at least 44,000 more five-year-olds to attain a good level of development a year by 2028 – a formidable ambition in a short space of time. This may incentivise a focus on children who only need a small boost to 'catch up', or a narrow focus on a specific cohort of children – today's two-year-olds who will be five in 2028. Like most targets, this one could also be gamed: the 'good level of development' (GLD) milestone is a subjective, teacher-assessed measure with no external moderation, making it relatively easy for schools to inflate scores. If

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\* Between 2016 and 2020, the average tenure was 18 months (source: the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect database).

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the impact of these incentives is not actively considered, the government could end up meeting its headline target by 2028, but inadvertently neglecting its long-term opportunity mission.

## **Fiscal pressures limit long-term investment in early childhood development**

The 2000s saw sustained investment in and cross-government commitment to prevention through Treasury-backed initiatives such as Sure Start and Every Child Matters.<sup>3,4</sup> Early years was a government priority, and this fostered a shared sense of purpose across central and local government. As one sector expert recalled: “In the Every Child Matters (ECM) era, you could go to central government, a local authority, or a school – and they’d all tell you what ECM was. People saw themselves as part of a collective whole: I do this bit, others do that.”

But the landscape has shifted dramatically over the past 15 years and the spending envelope for the early years has been squeezed.\* During the 2010s, austerity measures significantly reduced local government budgets. Financial pressures forced local authorities to channel scarce funding into acute, crisis-driven services – where needs are urgent, visible and underpinned by strong legal duties – rather than preventative programmes, which are not legally mandated, are less electorally salient and do not deliver immediate savings.<sup>5</sup> This shift steadily eroded the services that support babies, young children and their parents during the most critical development period. Local authority spending on early years interventions – including family support and provision for the under-fives – has fallen, from nearly £4 billion in 2010/11 to just £2.5bn in 2023/24.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, spending on acute youth services has risen in real terms, from £7bn in 2010/11 to £11.7bn in 2023/24, now consuming most of children’s services’ budgets.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, government funding for childcare providers has not kept pace with the true costs of provision. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that, once rising provider costs are factored in, providers’ core resource per hour for three- and four-year-olds was 15% lower in real terms in 2024–25 than in 2012–13.<sup>8</sup> Many providers are having to streamline costs and/or raise prices to remain commercially viable. In some settings, this has resulted in lower-paid, lower-qualified staff who lack the support and/or expertise to deliver effective provision.<sup>9</sup> This poorer-quality provision affects disadvantaged children more than others, as they rely on it as a protective factor against the challenges of growing up in poverty.\*\*<sup>10</sup>

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\* The public spending landscape over the past 15 years has been complex. Between 2010 and 2015, the government imposed quite severe cuts on some services – particularly those in local government and the criminal justice system – while relatively protecting services such as health and education. The government began to increase spending on services from 2019 onwards, although these rises have not been enough to match the increase in demand for services compared to 2010.

\*\* For a summary of how growing up in poverty is associated with additional problems that make it harder for children to reach development milestones, see Metcalfe S and Davison N, *Starting Behind, Staying Behind: The opportunity gap facing boys from low-income families at age 5 and beyond*, Institute for Government, 2025, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Staying-behind-left-behind-boys-low-income.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Staying-behind-left-behind-boys-low-income.pdf).

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There is also evidence that providers are using the early years pupil premium – designed specifically to improve provision for eligible children – to plug budget gaps, reducing targeted support for disadvantaged pupils.<sup>11</sup>

This pattern of lower investment in the early years has continued under Starmer's government. While education was widely seen as one of the 'winners' of the 2025 spending review, this reflects more spending on schools rather than on early child development. This is despite the early years being the stated 'foundation' of the government's opportunity mission.<sup>12</sup> Schools funding is set to rise by 1% per pupil by the end of 2028–29 (a £4.7bn outlay).<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the biggest injection of funding into the early years has been an additional £1.7bn, allocated for the childcare expansion for working families, most of which will not benefit the lowest-income families.<sup>14</sup> An additional £370 million over four years has also been allocated to rolling out school-based nurseries.

This has left comparably less funding for family support and wider services, which are especially important for children from the lowest-income households who are not eligible for government-funded childcare tied to parental employment. Labour has pledged £500m to expand the number of Best Start Family Hubs from 641 to around 1,000 by 2028.<sup>15</sup> This investment is far more limited than that for its predecessor, the Sure Start programme, which received the equivalent of £2.7bn (in 2023–24 prices) in 2009–10 and supported 3,600 centres at its peak.<sup>16,17</sup> But this much smaller budget also has to stretch further – supporting young people up to age 19, not just age four.<sup>18</sup> As Sarah Ronan, director of the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, puts it, the Best Start in Life strategy "dodges the one thing that would guarantee the success of this [childcare] expansion: proper investment".<sup>19</sup>

## **There is limited collective pressure on ministers to prioritise narrowing early attainment gaps**

Disadvantaged children – and the organisations and bodies that represent them – lack a strong, organised voice in policy making processes. Despite considerable energy and goodwill, advocacy for the sector and the young children it supports remains limited. While it is burgeoning in some places (for example, the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, which launched in 2023), it is fragmented in others (several charities focus on particular issues, such as child poverty or supporting children with additional needs, but with constrained budgets), and almost entirely absent for some groups (such as children who identify as Gypsy/Roma or Irish Travellers). This makes it easy for the issues facing these groups to be ignored or slip down the ladder of political priorities.

This lack of organised representation, coupled with limited public disquiet about the persistent inequalities that certain groups face in the earliest years, has not generated collective pressure or momentum for change.\* Qualitative research conducted for the Institute for Fiscal Studies/Ipsos MORI Deaton review of inequalities found that

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\* 'Pressure for change' is a concept that David Albury coined (see Albury D, *Building Innovative Practice into Policy Development*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, no date, [www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-06/David%20Albury%20-%20Building%20Innovation%20practice%20into%20policy%20development.pdf](http://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-06/David%20Albury%20-%20Building%20Innovation%20practice%20into%20policy%20development.pdf)).

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many people are unaware of the extent of inequalities in the UK, and were generally “surprised – and sometimes shocked” when presented with statistical evidence of structural inequalities (as opposed to a meritocracy). Some participants, particularly older groups, viewed inequality as an unavoidable “fact of life”.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, public and policy discussions of educational attainment gaps tend to place the burden of responsibility on individuals, families or communities, rather than the structural and systemic factors that contribute to persistent disparities. As one expert put it, there is an “unconscious, taken-for-granted assumption that the problem is ‘ambition’”.<sup>21</sup> Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are frequently framed as lacking aspiration, motivation or parental support – narratives that obscure deeper causes such as poverty, inadequate access to high-quality early education, poor quality or insecure housing, and limited support services.<sup>22</sup> The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission have written extensively on how broader structural factors like these play a critical role in shaping educational outcomes throughout children’s schooling, yet these factors are frequently overlooked in public and policy discussions.<sup>23,24,25,26</sup>

This discourse influences not just how the public view the ‘problem’ of educational inequalities, but also crucially who they think is responsible for addressing it. A survey conducted by Ipsos MORI for the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood found that most people (51%) see parents as primarily responsible for “ensuring every child has access to the positive relationships, care and education they need to lead a healthy and fulfilling life”, rather than this being the collective responsibility of everyone in society\* (40%).<sup>27</sup> One former official told us that this view has informed a long-standing reluctance from central government to intervene in the private sphere of family life: “The point around stepping into the private household space has always been a concern for government – that you don’t want to be usurping the role of parents. This has also been perceived as a very hot political potato.”

This lack of collective pressure for change means ministers have not prioritised using government levers and funding to tackle the root causes of educational inequalities in the earliest years.

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\* Survey respondents were told: “By society, we mean everyone on this card: Wider family, Neighbours, Friends, Schools, Nurseries, Wider community, Health professionals (e.g. health visitors, nurses, midwives and GPs), Social workers, Local authority early help professionals (e.g. family support workers, youth workers), Childminder or nanny, Charity/Voluntary sector.”

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## 2. The primary focus of early years policy has been to expand childcare entitlements for better-off families

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**Summary:** Successive ministers – seeking to boost economic growth and meet demand for childcare – have directed the bulk of the limited early years funding envelope towards expanding government-funded childcare for working parents. This excludes families on the lowest incomes who are not in work. Spending on other policy goals, such as improving the quality of early education and family support services, has been comparatively lower in recent times, despite their proven benefits for child development, especially for the most disadvantaged children.

### **Successive governments have expanded childcare entitlements for working parents at pace**

Government-funded childcare, which the then Labour government introduced in 1998, was expanded at pace under the coalition and Conservative governments. In brief, the key decisions have been as follows:

- 1998: A free nursery education place for all four-year-olds is introduced (equivalent to 12.5 hours a week for 33 weeks of the year).<sup>1</sup>
- 2004: Entitlement is extended to three-year-olds.<sup>2</sup>
- 2006: Section 7 of the Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on English local authorities to secure early years provision free of charge.<sup>3</sup>
- 2010: All three- and four-year-old children in England become eligible for 15 hours a week of government-funded childcare during term time.<sup>4</sup>
- 2013: That entitlement is extended to two-year-olds from disadvantaged families.<sup>5</sup>
- 2016: Section 1 of the Childcare Act 2016 places a duty on the secretary of state to secure 30 hours of childcare a week, free of charge, for qualifying children of working parents for 38 weeks of the year (or equivalent).<sup>6</sup>
- 2017: The offer for three- and four-year-olds is doubled to 30 hours a week for working families meeting specific earnings thresholds.<sup>7</sup>

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- 2023 onwards: The government announces a major expansion of entitlements to children aged nine months and above, to be rolled out in phases from 2024 onwards.<sup>8</sup>

Over this period, early years policy was increasingly responsive to the needs of working parents. Both George Osborne and Rishi Sunak made a political choice to prioritise measures that would support parents (especially mothers) back to work and drive economic growth.<sup>9</sup> As Sunak put it to a nursery he visited in 2024: “This is a really positive week for the expansion of our childcare offer – to support families, giving them the choice of how best to juggle childcare and their career.”<sup>10</sup>

## **There has been comparably less investment in early childhood services and narrowing inequalities**

As a result of these policy changes, the bulk of early years spending has been directed towards the expansion of government-funded childcare for better-off families to boost labour market participation. This has left comparatively less available – within the constraints of a tight funding envelope – for improving early childhood services and reducing inequalities. Notable exceptions have been:

- the Troubled Families programme
- the introduction of family hubs in 75 local authorities across England in 2021
- the early years pupil premium,<sup>\*</sup> although historically this has been much lower than the equivalent for reception-age children
- the 15-hour childcare offer for two-year-olds from disadvantaged households.<sup>\*\*11,12</sup>

Experts told us that this focus on expanding the *quantity* of childcare has meant that there has not been enough focus on the quality of childcare. As one put it to us:

**“Because the narrative about early education childcare has been one about childcare and women that work, we haven’t had the national discussion that this is something that we do because it’s good for our children. We haven’t used that opportunity to say ‘well, it’s only good for our children if it’s good [quality]’. Quality doesn’t matter if you just see it as a dumping ground for children, so women can work. Quality matters if you think the reason we do this is for our kids.”**

The prominence of economic objectives in early years policy has persisted under the Starmer government. With the growth mission as its top priority, it has maintained the Sunak government’s rollout of funded childcare for children from nine months old (which itself followed the 2019 Labour manifesto commitment to extend childcare provision to one-year-olds).<sup>13</sup>

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\* The early years public premium is extra funding given to early years settings (such as nurseries and childminders) to help improve outcomes for disadvantaged children from nine months upwards.

\*\* The 15-hour childcare scheme – 15 hours of free early education or childcare a week, for 38 weeks a year – is typically aimed at children aged three and four. But some two-year-olds from disadvantaged families are also eligible.

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The challenge for the incoming Labour government was whether it could 'square the circle': continuing policies that were designed for other purposes (boosting parental employment), while reorienting them to meet two additional goals (driving up early education quality and tackling entrenched inequalities). The bulk of spending in the Best Start in Life strategy is still tied to government-funded childcare for working families, which excludes households on the lowest incomes. The remaining spend will be used on policies aimed at closing inequalities, such as:

- rolling out Best Start Family Hubs
- introducing new financial incentives for early years teachers to work in disadvantaged areas
- investing in home learning and parenting programmes.<sup>14</sup>

This is an important shift, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that funding for the childcare expansion could reach £5bn a year by 2028–29 – 10 times as much as the additional £500m a year announced in the strategy for the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs.<sup>15</sup> This means the lion's share of spending in the early years system remains directed at the government's growth mission, not its opportunity mission. Sector bodies such as the Early Education and Childcare Coalition argue that funding is still not enough to meaningfully deliver on all three of the government's objectives – boosting parental employment, improving early education quality and narrowing inequalities – and that the rise in employer national insurance contributions and the minimum wage risks overwhelming an "already fragile system".<sup>16,17</sup>

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## 3. Successive governments have not stewarded the childcare market well enough for quality and better outcomes

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**Summary:** The government funds a large proportion of early years provision but has not stewarded the childcare market well enough to deliver quality and inclusive provision. In the absence of stronger oversight, the market has become oriented towards meeting demand at scale rather than delivering on early education and child development goals. While many large, multi-chain providers are committed to offering high-quality experiences, they must also remain commercially viable. This has contributed to the following set of market failures:

- Childcare providers tend to gravitate to areas where parents can pay more, leaving more deprived areas with lower-quality provision, or even 'childcare deserts'.<sup>1</sup>
- Financial pressures appear to be worsening the availability of childcare places for children with SEND.<sup>2</sup>
- Quality is highly variable, with limited safeguards to prevent childcare settings (even if only a minority) from putting profit above quality.<sup>3</sup>

These market failures risk deepening early educational inequalities and more broadly delivering poor value for money – as has occurred in other public service markets such as adult social care.<sup>4</sup>

### **Governments' hands-off approach has contributed to failures in the childcare market**

As described in Chapter 2, successive governments have rolled out childcare entitlements at pace – increasing parental demand for places and generating rapid growth in the market. There are now more than 60,000 registered early years education providers – from large multi-chain providers and school-based nurseries to childminders and small, socially driven, settings.<sup>5</sup>

But government has not stewarded the market well enough for quality and better outcomes. In a well-functioning market, service users – in this case, parents – would be well informed, have plenty of choice and be able to select providers that best meet their requirements, encouraging productive competition and a 'race to the top' in

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quality. However, it is well known that convenience and price often outweigh quality in parental decision making. This is exacerbated when parents have limited information about what good-quality provision looks and feels like before they have experienced it. As one early years expert, who is also a parent, told us:

**“I was amazed when I was looking at nurseries to send my kids to. I’d go around places where I was like, ‘wow, I wouldn’t touch this with a barge pole’. And parents are signing up because it’s cheap, it has a space and it’s near the station. It’s convenient.”**

Institute for Government research has previously highlighted that policy makers often pay too little attention to the long-term development of competitive markets in public services.<sup>6</sup> This is especially true of the early years market – it is not clear *who is responsible for*:

- setting the ‘rules of the game’
- monitoring how the market is developing
- ensuring parents are able to make informed choices
- setting out how under-performance and failure will be managed.

Ofsted remains the main regulator for early years provision, but its capacity and budget have shrunk significantly – despite a recent temporary increase.<sup>7</sup> Much of its limited resources for the early years sector has been absorbed by registration checks for a growing childcare market, rather than driving up quality and standards in provision.<sup>8</sup>

This hands-off approach on the part of government has deepened inequalities. As noted at the start of this chapter, the childcare market has become oriented towards meeting demand at scale rather than delivering on early education and child development goals. While many large, multi-chain providers are committed to offering high-quality experiences, they must also remain commercially viable. This has contributed to a set of persistent market failures that have deepened the early years attainment gap:

- **Early years provision is concentrated in more affluent areas.** Providers gravitate towards higher-income communities where families can afford to pay more.<sup>9,10</sup>
- **There is patchy provision for everyone else.** Families in low-income or remote communities face poorer-quality provision or complete ‘childcare deserts’. Some children with SEND also miss out – research by Dingley’s Promise found that one in five parents of children with SEND have experienced being turned away from early years settings, with providers citing insufficient funding and a lack of staff as the key reasons for this.<sup>11</sup>

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- **Quality is highly variable.** While there are pockets of innovation, poor practice persists, with little to incentivise the spread of the former or address the latter. The result is a postcode lottery in terms of the early education and support that young children receive.<sup>12</sup>
  - **Small providers are squeezed out.** The expansion of government-funded childcare disadvantages smaller providers. Some of these serve low-income areas and therefore have limited ability to charge top-up fees or cross-subsidise from higher-earning families.<sup>13</sup>

The result is a fragmented market that is not conducive to raising standards in early education and to closing inequalities. David Bell, former permanent secretary at the Department for Education, told us that the question of how the childcare market is overseen and regulated is “unfinished business”. Meanwhile, Sam Freedman, senior fellow at the Institute for Government, has highlighted the dire state of privatised adult and children’s social care, and cautions that early education is following a similar trajectory.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Best Start in Life strategy proposes a different approach**

With the government now funding around 80% of early education and childcare hours, ministers have recognised that the hands-off approach described above is no longer tenable. The Best Start in Life strategy, published in July 2025, has committed the government to more actively shaping the early years system to improve outcomes – a ‘market steward’ role that the Institute for Government first recommended more than a decade ago.<sup>15</sup> This will require paying particular attention to provider incentives that risk undermining the government’s objectives around quality and inclusion.

The need for corrective action is pressing. The Early Education and Childcare Coalition’s annual pulse check in May 2025 found that nearly a quarter of providers had cut places for children with additional needs due to the cost of specialist support, while more than a quarter had frozen recruitment in the past year. Fifteen per cent of parents have also had to quit their jobs due to the cost of, or lack of access to, childcare.<sup>16</sup>

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## 4. Siloed and vertical accountability structures make it harder to tackle the root causes of inequalities

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**Summary:** Cross-government co-ordination has always been hard: departments tend to prioritise the issues they have direct control over and are held accountable for. The Labour government's missions approach, the explicit aim of which is to encourage more joined-up working across silos, has yet to have any obvious impact on this problem. Without cross-government collaboration, policy more often responds to symptoms rather than root causes.

The drivers of early childhood development inequalities – from poverty and insecure housing to neighbourhood deprivation and poor mental health – are complex, interconnected and take time to meaningfully shift. The policy levers with the greatest impact on these factors, including those with a significant impact on children's home and community environments, are distributed across government, with no clear accountability structures for ensuring departments (other than DfE) are incentivised to deliver policies and services that address the root causes of early attainment gaps.

### **The drivers of early childhood development are complex, interconnected and take time to shift**

As highlighted in the Introduction to this report, shifting the dial on early attainment gaps is a 'wicked' challenge. No single intervention is likely to make a difference on its own, as multiple, overlapping influences – across education, health, housing, income, cultural expectations and more – shape outcomes. Delivery chains are fragmented and complex. Interventions in one part of the system will have knock-on effects in other areas. The challenge is also constantly evolving. Major changes to families' contexts – such as increasing exposure to screens and social media and the effects of the cost-of-living crisis – all create new issues that policy makers must navigate to secure maximum impact.

But several departments hold the levers for addressing these disparate issues and driving down early attainment gaps. An effective policy response requires different parts of government – from DfE to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) – to align policy levers and responses to tackle the root causes of lower attainment before a child even enters school.

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## **The persistent problem of poor cross-government co-ordination makes it harder to implement joined-up approaches**

It is well known that central government finds cross-government co-ordination hard.<sup>1,2</sup> Budgets are almost always agreed bilaterally between departments and the Treasury. In accordance with the rules of *Managing Public Money*, permanent secretaries, as accounting officers of their departments, are directly accountable for how most public money is spent by their department, and their department alone.<sup>3</sup> Ministers are, perhaps not unsurprisingly, incentivised to focus more on those policy areas directly within their remit than those shared with or led by other ministerial colleagues. This pushes DfE towards levers in schools, and therefore children who are just about to enter or are already in the school system. It also discourages other departments from prioritising policies that would support the objectives of another department, if those fall outside their primary focus.

Different departments also operate with distinct 'theories of change', which often results in circular finger-pointing rather than joint solutions. For example, early interventions to improve low educational attainment – DfE's priority – rely on turning around parental and home factors (led by other departments), while early intervention to support a parent with complex needs (led, for instance, by DHSC or DWP) might emphasise everything schools failed to address in the first place (DfE's remit). As one expert observed: "In terms of SR [spending review] submissions, departments are not working together. People are all talking different languages."

This leaves a gap in the system where no part of government is responsible for joining up around people's needs. Potential signals of developmental concerns – such as a traumatic birth, a premature birth, breastfeeding challenges, health visitor checks or challenges stemming from poverty, insecure housing or substance misuse – are not systematically identified or followed up. There is little agreement on which risks to early development should trigger support, who should pick them up, and what follow-up is needed. The result is a fragmented system that struggles to recognise and respond to the holistic needs of children and families.

The Labour government set out to address this, promising a mission-led approach. It introduced new cross-departmental governance structures (although it is not clear from the outside what the membership is, how frequently they meet and what collective decision making powers they hold). The Treasury set out a new spending review process, designed to find cross-department efficiencies and encourage joint spending bids.

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But this approach has not yet produced the step change the government promised. The 2025 spending review still lacked any cross-departmental budgets.<sup>4</sup> Officials report that, while meetings between departments have become more common, meaningful joint working remains slow and elusive. Even when two departments are implementing the same policy, joining up operationally can be difficult. As one official put it to us:

**"In the early days of the opportunity mission, there was lots of energy around government [put into cross-government working]. Now, we are teetering on the edge of paralysis in terms of bureaucracy. Just setting up the missions and trying to get departments working in a certain way has been tough for Whitehall."**

This poor coherence is also reflected in the government's strategic documents. Various strategies relevant to the government's opportunity mission – the Best Start in Life strategy,<sup>5</sup> the 10 Year Health Plan for England<sup>6</sup> and the child poverty strategy<sup>7</sup> – cross-reference each other but contain fundamentally separate streams of policy work. This creates challenges for central government officials, who are likely to be primarily directed by their department's main strategy over others. It also creates confusion for those further down the delivery chain, who need to decipher and stitch together central government's position from several documents that are only partially aligned.

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## 5. Central government's pragmatic approach comes with trade-offs: missed opportunities and a disconnect with the front line

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**Summary:** Central government officials operate under several pressures stemming from the factors mentioned in Chapters 1 to 4, that limit their room for manoeuvre. These pressures, combined with a Whitehall tendency to 'control' complexity and implement policies that deliver value for money against certain metrics, have encouraged certain ways of working. These include:

- setting national targets
- standardising the curriculum and assessment process
- prioritising evidence-based interventions in schools that target specific developmental needs rather than their root causes.

This approach has trade-offs: missed opportunities for flexibility and innovation at the front line (on top of existing policies and initiatives) and gaps in understanding between central government and the people responsible for delivery. From a central government perspective, their approach is pragmatic and offers value for money, given the constraints and trade-offs government faces. But practitioners see it as detached from the realities of the children and families they serve, especially those who are most disadvantaged. The risk is a growing and persistent disconnect between central government and those on the front line – with the latter calling for more holistic approaches, such as Sure Start<sup>1,2</sup> and Total Place,<sup>3,4</sup> which have previously been effective in improving outcomes for groups at risk of poorer outcomes.

These dynamics – present across successive administrations – have contributed to some children being 'left behind', or under-served, from the start.

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## Central government takes a centralised, standardised and universal approach to policy making

The combined effect of the factors set out in Chapters 1 to 4 shapes the overall environment in which central government officials operate and the countervailing pressures they need to navigate to design an early years system that delivers value for money. These pressures include:

- **political constraints** – narrowing early years inequalities has rarely been among government's main political priorities
- the comparatively **low budget** available for narrowing early years inequalities, in a context of wider fiscal pressures
- **limited levers** within DfE to address underlying drivers of lower attainment
- **poor cross-government co-ordination** which undermines more joined-up approaches

These conditions limit officials' room for manoeuvre and steer them towards certain ways of working: a *centralised, standardised and universal* approach to policy making. The hallmarks of this approach in early years policy have been:

- setting national targets based on a standardised measure, such as the 'good level of development' benchmark at age five
- a national curriculum and assessment culture that many perceive prioritises maths and literacy over other learning and development domains
- the scaling of proven, school-based interventions – such as the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, and the Maths Champions programme – that address specific developmental needs.

## This can leave some groups behind and fuel a disconnect with the front line

These decisions – set out in more detail below – are pragmatic and rational, given the constraints officials face: they aim to give government the best shot at achieving its goals within budget, manage risk responsibly and make best use of public money. Central government systems and oversight bodies, mindful of public and press scrutiny, see ministers and permanent secretaries as chiefly accountable for performance and value for money in many local services.<sup>5</sup> As we have argued elsewhere, they are "often nervous about devolving further funding and power to local areas with varying levels of leadership, accountability and capability".<sup>6</sup> This has resulted in a "narrowness of thinking in Whitehall departments",<sup>7</sup> with central government typically focusing "upon the delivery of a centrally determined set of outcomes, rather than creating empowered, locally led institutions and working in partnership with them to achieve jointly agreed goals".<sup>8</sup>

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This is particularly the case in education provision, where accountability for performance lies with DfE, Ofsted, Ofqual and academy chains – not local authorities.<sup>9</sup> As one former DfE official put it: “DfE has been one of, if not the most, centralising departments in Whitehall. The whole DNA of the department – through national curriculum, testing, Ofsted – has created not just an infrastructure of central control but a mindset about centralisation.”

This approach on the part of central government falls short of meeting some children’s and families’ needs, with successive governments presiding over persistent and wide inequalities in early years outcomes. This has produced a gulf in understanding between policy makers and those responsible for delivery. Many of the latter see the real-world effects of this gap in their day-to-day work and go above and beyond to bridge it to deliver better outcomes on the ground. In recent times, successive governments have struggled to overcome this disconnect, mobilise the system around a shared sense of purpose and ensure no children get left behind from the start. Below we summarise the key tensions.

### **National targets set direction, but are inevitably flawed and can create perverse incentives**

National targets based on standardised measures of key development milestones are an essential policy making tool. They help clarify aims across complex systems and can be critical in driving rapid progress.<sup>10</sup> Setting a clear, single target gives ministers, officials and the public a practical metric against which to judge progress, strengthening accountability for delivery.

For example, the government’s ‘good level of development’ (GLD) metric is a pragmatic choice for a target. It is based on the early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP), has been collected for years – allowing year-on-year comparisons – and assesses many of the key skills that children are expected to show and build on throughout their schooling years. From central government’s perspective, it is the best available off-the-shelf measure, and the logical one for ministers to choose.

But there are two key downsides to standardised national targets, exemplified here through the good level of development target:

#### **1. A single metric inevitably simplifies a complex policy goal to one measure of progress that cannot measure everything that might matter. This fuels a disconnect with front-line providers, who dispute its validity.**

Those responsible for delivery – teachers, early years practitioners and place-based leaders – point to the GLD target’s many flaws, expressing concerns that policy makers are designing a set of policies and expectations on the basis of an incomplete, unreliable and unfair measure.<sup>11</sup> **It is widely contested in terms of ‘what’ it measures.** Defining what a good level of development at age five looks like is notoriously difficult, especially as our understanding of childhood and brain development is constantly evolving. The purist view is that the measure imposes a uniform standard on something that cannot, and arguably should not, be standardised.

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Some accept the need for a standardised measure, but dispute the validity of the existing one. The key argument here is that it is a teacher-assessed 'best guess' indicator of a child's development, not a standardised objective assessment. This is not least because schools can administer it at any point between April and June in a given year and local authorities are no longer obliged to moderate results between schools. Moreover, as it is a blunt 'pass-fail' measure, some argue that it does not account for differing developmental trajectories and that it risks setting up some children for failure by shaping policy and practice around a narrow definition of 'school readiness'.<sup>12</sup>

Both sides of this debate can reasonably argue that they are right. As former DfE permanent secretary David Bell notes, there is "naivety on the part of local actors... not recognising there must be some kind of metric. And equally naivety on behalf of central government that... your single metric can encapsulate everything you need to know." The key issue is not that this tension exists, but how central government navigates it to design and deliver effective policy, particularly given it needs trust and buy-in from front-line services to deliver on its objectives.

**2. Targets risk creating perverse incentives and unintended consequences that undermine the long-term goals they were introduced to drive forward.** This can make policy even less effective for groups who are most under-served by existing policy – and furthest from the target outcome – as policy makers are disincentivised to direct attention and resources towards these groups.<sup>13</sup>

As the Institute for Government has warned previously, the government's target for 75% of children to reach a good level of development by the end of reception year in 2028 risks introducing perverse incentives, not least by encouraging policy makers, teachers and practitioners to concentrate on pupils near the 'pass' boundary rather than those with the greatest needs.<sup>14</sup>

The challenge of identifying a single measure to judge progress against, without leaving some groups behind, is not unique to early years policy. For instance, when successive governments adopted a target for pupils to achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C (now grades 9-4), schools focused on pupils at the C/D grade boundary, comparatively overlooking children who were on track to get lower grades than that.<sup>15</sup> This became apparent after the coalition government announced a new target based on Progress 8, a measure of average progress, which removed these incentives.<sup>16</sup>

### **A national curriculum and assessment culture that prioritises literacy and numeracy has benefits, but crowds out tailored provision that could better meet the needs of children at risk of poor outcomes**

A standardised national curriculum and assessment approach is pragmatic. It protects equal opportunities and creates a fair national assessment of skills, supporting the job market in matching skills with employment. There are some exceptions, though, where curriculums and assessments have been tailored – such as splitting GCSEs into 'foundation' and 'higher' tier assessments, and tailored curriculums in special schools serving children with SEND.

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However, given resource constraints, national policy generally has to cater for the full diversity of children's experiences and focus on the majority. In many cases, it is impractical, and sometimes undesirable, to target policy to the needs of specific groups or individuals. Not only is it typically more expensive (as it reduces economies of scale and may require specialist qualifications to deliver),<sup>17</sup> it also introduces new risks. For example, some children's abilities and needs may be misjudged – particularly those vulnerable to unconscious bias – leading to less effective provision than a standardised approach.<sup>18</sup>

In relation to the early years curriculum, successive ministers have made a political choice to put greater weight on literacy and numeracy (and famously, phonics). This approach aims to support all children's foundational skills and improve the UK's future skills base and competitiveness.<sup>19</sup> But it has created another tension with those on the front line, who argue that the elevation of literacy and numeracy is driving an inappropriate 'schoolification' of the early years. From their perspective, it crowds out more inclusive, alternative approaches that tailor provision to individual needs and learning styles – for instance, play-based approaches that place greater emphasis on the other prime areas of development: social, emotional and physical development.

This tension between central government and the front line stems from a contested evidence base. Proponents of the government's approach point to the UK's excellent international record on reading and mathematics – ranking above average in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022.<sup>20</sup> But other experts suggest that this apparent success in the past few years is more to do with post-pandemic attainment falling sharply in other countries,<sup>21</sup> and point to the UK's scores on adolescent mental health and school attendance, which are among the worst in the OECD.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, they draw on the evidence base – such as the 2025 Raising the Nation Play Commission – which emphasises the benefits of play-based learning for engagement, attendance and teacher satisfaction,<sup>23,24</sup> and call for England to follow in the footsteps of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all of which have taken steps to enshrine the right to play.

Whether successive governments' approaches have been right or wrong depends on what counts as 'success' (which will inevitably be contested in a diverse society). Nonetheless, what is clear is that the national curriculum and assessment culture leaves limited space for professional autonomy and judgment around how best to support children with the greatest needs. Those working in early years settings and schools describe the curriculum moving forward relentlessly – as one put it, "like a juggernaut". Fatigue across the system has reportedly fostered a tick-box mentality, which can undermine the quality of children's educational experiences, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged children.

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## Scaling proven interventions that address specific developmental needs makes practical sense, but misses potentially 'higher risk, higher reward' options

Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing ecosystem to support evidence-based policy making. DfE has been at the forefront of this, with ministers investing £125m to support The Sutton Trust and Impetus in launching the Education Endowment Foundation in 2011. DfE then set up the Early Intervention Foundation (now Foundations: What Works Centre for Children & Families) in February 2013, as part of the wider network of 'What Works' centres.<sup>25,26</sup> These institutions have been vital in testing and scaling up evidence-based interventions to support better educational outcomes – some of which have been rolled out by successive governments. Most recently, the education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, committed DfE to expanding access to Maths Champions and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention – two evidence-based programmes that raise outcomes in critical early skills.

Scaling interventions that work, backed by randomised controlled trials, is a sensible use of public money in a resource-constrained context, especially when the results are so impressive. Reception-aged children eligible for free school meals who took part in the Nuffield Early Language Intervention made seven months of additional progress compared to children eligible for free school meals who did not take part – particularly impressive given that seven months equates to more than 10% of their life so far.<sup>27</sup>

These interventions are low risk and high reward, so they appeal to accounting officers and ministers both in DfE and the Treasury, who understandably have a preference for proven programmes that deliver visible, short-term results over often-expensive preventative programmes with uncertain or delayed outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, these interventions also have the benefit of reaching most children (being in a school context) and sit firmly in DfE's remit (avoiding the need for cross-government co-ordination, which can be perennially difficult, as set out in Chapter 4).

But these interventions address *symptoms* (however effectively) and rarely address the root causes of early years attainment gaps. These root causes typically affect children long before they start school. For example, the Nuffield Early Language Intervention is proven to improve language skills,<sup>29</sup> but it cannot address the underlying barriers holding children's development back, such as insecure housing, poverty, neighbourhood deprivation and poor parental mental health. As one early years expert put it: "If you can't trust a grown-up, or you're traumatised, no language intervention is going to sort you out... You need support from the start that looks holistically at the child."

In a fiscally constrained environment, policy makers have not been able to invest *additional* resources in riskier interventions that may address the root causes of early years attainment gaps and shift the dial for children at greatest risk of poor outcomes. Such holistic approaches are highly uncertain:

- Their impacts are hard to measure through randomised controlled trials.

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- They are challenging to scale given the complex mix of factors that shape children's home and community environments.
  - Their full benefits may only be realised some years down the line.

This makes them less appealing, and lower priority in an environment shaped by short-termism and fiscal constraints. As one former DfE official put it: "How would you know whether your intervention has been effective?"

### **This leaves little room for alternative approaches that could deliver a step change for groups that policy making commonly under-serves**

The combined effect of the government's *centralised, standardised and universal* approach to policy making leaves little room for alternative approaches on the ground that are:

- **tailored** to individual children's and families' needs
- **flexible**, with **locally rooted** expertise and relationships informing their design and implementation
- **holistic**, designed to address the underlying drivers of attainment gaps, including by joining up siloed public services
- **higher risk** – evidence led with long-term benefits, but do not meet the high bar of approval that the Treasury requires (for example via a randomised controlled trial).

Some of the most effective approaches in recent history have drawn on precisely these principles of policy making. Initiatives such as Sure Start, the Troubled Families programme and Total Place have all – with varying degrees of success – delivered benefits for families facing multiple disadvantage.

The Labour government's Test, Learn and Grow programme is a positive innovation – a small-scale version of these flexible and innovative approaches that could reap long-term results for the most left-behind groups. But it is just that – small scale – and only an initial stepping stone to rolling out locally rooted early years services that deliver big change. Meanwhile, the persistent policy making failure of early attainment gaps remains large, pervasive and urgent.

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## 6. Conclusion: how effective has the Labour government been in addressing these blind spots?

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Systemic policy making failures have contributed to some children falling behind in their earliest years. Sharp inequalities in early attainment have persisted for decades and have been widening in recent times.<sup>1</sup>

The Labour government has said it wants to narrow these inequalities. It has taken some promising steps in this direction, by:

- making early years attainment a key milestone for this parliament
- beginning to implement local targets focused on – if not reducing, at least not widening – opportunity gaps
- expanding support for low-income families (for example, through lifting the two-child benefit cap and extending eligibility for free school meals)
- pushing for innovation across the system (for example, by 'test, learn and grow' pilots around England, rooted in strong central–local government partnerships).

But elements of the government's approach risk repeating the systemic failings we have identified in this report. Table 1 sets out our analysis of how effective the Labour government has been so far in addressing these 'blind spots'.

Table 1 **Assessment of Labour’s approach in addressing systemic blind spots**

<b>Blind spot 1</b>	<b>Our assessment of how effective Labour has been in addressing this</b>
<p><b>There is little political incentive to prioritise disadvantaged children</b></p>	<p>The government has made narrowing educational inequalities one of its five core missions and the Best Start in Life strategy<sup>2</sup> is widely seen as an important first step in putting young children at the heart of policy making. The government has already introduced several targeted interventions to support groups at risk of poor outcomes such as extending eligibility for free school meals, removing the two-child benefit cap and rolling out free breakfast clubs in primary schools (starting with schools with a free school meals rate of 40% or higher).</p> <p>However, fiscal pressures continue to limit long-term investment in early childhood development. Key interventions such as the new Best Start Family Hubs are operating with significantly less resources than their predecessor – Sure Start.</p> <p>The government’s short-term ‘school readiness’ target could also inadvertently make it more difficult to make progress on its long-term mission to reduce attainment gap.<sup>3</sup> It is welcome that local authorities’ new good level of development targets – provisionally set by DfE – stipulate that local authorities should increase their average good level of development rate while at least maintaining the same attainment gap as now. This is a good start. But maintaining attainment gaps is not the same as reducing them. In practice, it risks cementing them. DfE will need to incentivise local authorities, providers and schools to focus on groups at risk of poor outcomes (such as boys from low-income families) to avoid entrenching inequalities.<sup>4</sup></p>

Blind spot 2	How effective Labour has been in addressing this?
<p><b>The primary focus of early years policy has been to expand childcare entitlements for better-off families</b></p>	<p>The government has committed some of its limited early years spending envelope to improving the quality of early education settings and tackling entrenched disadvantage– for example, through the roll-out of family hubs, clearer pathways into the profession and financial incentives of up to £4,500 for early years teachers in disadvantaged areas.<sup>5</sup> The DfE is also pursuing an agenda focused on thriving and belonging at school – one of the four pillars of the government’s opportunity mission – to support the drive towards more inclusive mainstream education.<sup>6</sup></p> <p>However, policies aimed at boosting parental employment dominate early years spending, with the bulk of it directed towards government-funded childcare for working families – excluding lowest-income households. This has left comparably less investment for targeted interventions for the groups least likely to reach a good level of development.</p>

Blind spot 3	How effective Labour has been in addressing this?
<p><b>Successive governments have not stewarded the childcare market well enough for quality and better outcomes</b></p>	<p>With the government now funding around 80% of early education and childcare hours, ministers have recognised that this hands-off approach is no longer tenable. The Best Start in Life strategy has committed the government to more actively shaping the early years system to improve outcomes – a ‘market steward’ role that the Institute for Government first recommended more than a decade ago.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>However, central government will need to pay close attention to how providers respond to the expansion of government-funded childcare, which has the potential to <i>reduce</i> the provision available to some groups such as children with SEND. Rising demand for places (linked to the childcare expansion), coupled with resource and capacity pressures in the sector, mean provision for children with SEND is becoming increasingly scarce, such that just 6% of local authorities reported having enough of this provision in 2024, down from 18% in 2023.<sup>8</sup> The government says that addressing the needs of children with SEND in their early years is a priority and it has promised to set out a plan for SEND reform more generally in its forthcoming schools white paper.<sup>9</sup> That plan will need to credibly show a path to improving access to early years education for children with SEND.</p> <p>More generally, central government has set an expectation on local government to shape early years markets, but its ability to fulfil the role of market steward is likely to vary across England. Success will depend on the right level of support and oversight from central government.</p>

Blind spot 4	How effective Labour has been in addressing this?
<p><b>Siloed and vertical accountability structures make it harder to tackle the root causes of inequalities</b></p>	<p>There have been laudable attempts to join up departments' work around the common goal of the opportunity mission, with commitments in the Best Start in Life strategy, 10 Year Health Plan for England<sup>10</sup> and child poverty strategy<sup>11</sup> reinforcing one another.</p> <p>However, departments' budgets remain siloed – with no joint spending plans in the spending review. And officials report that, while there have been more meetings with their counterparts in other departments, this has not translated into meaningful joint working.</p> <p>Overcoming this systemic blind spot now rests with local areas. Central government has asked every local authority to develop Best Start Plans by April 2026 that are responsive to local needs. It has also implemented 'test, learn and grow' pilots to innovate and scale more effective solutions. Their impact will depend on whether they meaningfully tackle the underlying drivers of inequalities that hold some children back from the start.</p>

Blind spot 5	How effective Labour has been in addressing this?
<p><b>Central government’s pragmatic approach comes with trade-offs: missed opportunities and a disconnect with the front line</b></p>	<p>Since Labour came to office, central government has continued to adopt a centralised, standardised and universal approach to early years policy. There are good, pragmatic reasons to take this approach to deliver on the ambitions set out in the Best Start in Life strategy. But this approach also poses several risks for the government’s long-term ambition to break the link between a child’s background and their future success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A ‘good level of development’ target may leave some groups further behind.</b></li> </ul> <p>The target for 75% of five-year-olds to reach a ‘good level of development’ by 2028 is setting direction. But, with so much activity geared towards this target, experts and those close to delivery are concerned that it risks leaving behind those children for whom this is not a helpful goal.<sup>12</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A national curriculum and assessment culture may crowd out tailored provision that could better meet the needs of children at risk of poor outcomes.</b></li> </ul> <p>The Labour government’s good level of development target – combined with the continued elevation of literacy and numeracy within the early years foundation stage – is creating a tension with front-line practitioners, who argue that the government is driving an inappropriate ‘schoolification’ of the early years, which leaves less room for more tailored, play-based approaches that can support children to hit developmental milestones at their own speed.</p>

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<p>(Continued)</p>	<p>The government has good reasons to endorse its approach, given the UK's international success in reading and writing. But it will need to navigate this disconnect with the sector to deliver on its objectives. A good first step would be to more clearly explain its rationale to those further down the delivery chain and respond to concerns from the front line. Providers told us that this would mean acknowledging the limitations of central government's approach, recognising the wider drivers of attainment and pairing assessment with meaningful support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Missed opportunities to invest in 'higher risk, higher reward' options.</b></li></ul> <p>The Labour government continues to invest in scaling tightly scoped, evidence-based interventions in schools and family hubs. Rolling out 'what works' is a sensible use of public money in a resource-constrained context.</p> <p>But the tight fiscal envelope means that there is comparably less investment in tailored, locally rooted interventions that appear 'riskier', but potentially more effective in addressing the root causes of attainment gaps and delivering more substantial benefits in the long term.</p> <p>Best Start Family Hubs and test, learn and grow pilots around England provide an opportunity for areas to tailor services to local needs. But these are – for the moment – small scale compared to the level of need families have, and the large, pervasive and urgent nature of early attainment gaps.</p>
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The Labour government has taken steps to mitigate some of the systemic policy making failures that successive governments have experienced – but it has further to go to shift the dial for groups of children at greatest risk of poor outcomes.

To continue this conversation, we will be publishing a paper in early 2026 that looks at how the government can make a success of its Best Start in Life Strategy and drive desired outcomes on the ground.<sup>13</sup> This paper will set out the opportunities and constraints that local areas face in supporting boys from low-income families – including promising delivery models – and broader recommendations for how government can better enable local areas to reduce inequalities for groups of children who are persistently under-served.

### **Laying the groundwork for medium- and long-term reform**

If you are interested in how decision and policy making processes can be redesigned to help deliver a step change in outcomes for children who are left behind, or under-served, by policy making from the start, please get in touch: [polycymaking@instituteofgovernment.org.uk](mailto:polycymaking@instituteofgovernment.org.uk)

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### 3. Successive governments have not stewarded the childcare market well enough for quality and better outcomes

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## 6. Conclusion: how far has government begun to address these blind spots?

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