

Eligibility for the free early years entitlement for two-year-olds under Universal Credit

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents nearly 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the review of eligibility criteria for free early years entitlement for two-year-olds. We are committed to the national social mobility agenda and are concerned that NAO report of March 2016 *Entitlement to free early education and child care*¹ indicates that over 40% of eligible families do not take up their entitlement.
- 3 We believe that entitlement to passported benefits such as this should not require the claimant to make a separate application but that automatic registration should follow. The NAO report suggests that awareness of entitlement is an issue.
- 4 However, we acknowledge that local authorities are subject to shrinking resources and the opportunity for outreach is limited. Organisations such as Sure Start have provided networks of professionals in deprived communities; evidence² suggests the number of Sure Start centres in England is reducing with 156 centres having closed between 2010 and 2015.
- 5 The 2018 /19 DSG allocations³ indicate that £3.6 billion has been directed to Early Years.
- 6 Entitlement for two-year-olds early education should evidence impact and preparedness for children entering fulltime compulsory education. We note that the NAO report indicates according to Ofsted ratings provision at 15% of settings is NOT at least good.
- 7 ASCL are concerned that, anecdotally, children are entering the school system less prepared. This is an area for further investigation and will feature in our January 2018 Primary summit event Principles, Purpose and Impact. The quality of and accessibility to free early years education for two-year-olds is fundamental to this.

¹ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Entitlement-to-free-early-education-and-childcare.pdf>

² <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-12-01/55895/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dedicated-schools-grant-dsg-2018-to-2019>

With reference to your specific questions

Question 1: Do you agree with our proposed net earnings threshold to determine eligibility for the free early education entitlement for two-year-olds under Universal Credit?

- 8 It makes sense that eligibility criteria are focused on earnings. However we think that consideration should be given to tackling awareness and accessibility to at least good provision alongside financial constraints. Paragraphs 2-6 above.

Question 2: Do you feel that the proposal in this consultation may adversely affect any children who share one or more of the relevant protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010?

- 9 We think that children with protected characteristics will not be adversely affected. However we think that focus should be given to ensuring a positive impact on protected characteristic of race, in terms of awareness and accessibility. This is supported by NAO evidence⁴.
- 10 It is our view that this consultation presents an opportunity to contribute to the wider policy issues of social mobility and specifically to reach children in poverty. However we think that to have maximum effect it must be considered alongside access to quality provision and awareness of entitlement.
- 11 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Julia Harnden
Association of School and College Leaders
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⁴ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Entitlement-to-free-early-education-and-childcare.pdf>