

Open for twos

A decade since the launch of funded childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds, **Nicole Weinstein** finds out what provision for this age group looks like in schools



Ark Ayrton Nursery says increased funding will have a 'massive impact' on its provision for two-year-olds

It has been a decade since the Government introduced funding for disadvantaged two-year-olds, a move which prompted more schools to take in this age group. Since then, the number of primary schools in England offering nursery places for funded two-year-olds has slowly increased, rising by 25 per cent over the past five years, despite the number of funded children aged two in schools remaining at around 12,000.

With falling birth rates and empty classrooms, schools are increasingly looking at ways to ensure a steady pipeline of children coming through the system. Councils in parts of England where there is a shortage of childcare provision are also submitting proposals to allow schools to admit two-year-olds in an attempt to

make sure there is a sufficient supply of places.

For Sophie Bennett-Acres, head of Ark Ayrton Primary Academy in Portsmouth, which has been delivering places for two-year-olds for more than a decade, it is a 'no-brainer'.

'Why wouldn't schools want to get children in at two years old?', she asks. 'The difference you can make to that child in a year, compared to if they were sat at home, is massive.'

'Our data consistently shows that those who came to us at two years old out-perform their peers nationally and the rest of the cohort that joined at a later stage', she adds.

But some early years specialists have ongoing concerns around schools meeting the specific learning, developmental and

environmental needs of two-year-olds – and question the Government's childcare strategy in the face of increased nursery closures.

BUILDING A 'PIPELINE'

In January, *Nursery World* reported that Cheshire East Council put forward proposals to extend the age range of Pebble Brook Primary School and Underwood West Academy, based in Crewe, Cheshire, to accommodate two-year-olds after private nursery group Reach for the Stars closed nurseries on both school sites.

Purnima Tanuku, the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)'s chief executive, says the move represents a 'failure of government policy'.

'Nurseries can offer services which support parents and carers' working

patterns and boosts children's learning and development in their first five years,' she explains. 'Schools often do not offer this facility.'

However, James Hemsall, director of Hemsalls, which supported the Department for Education (DfE) in the roll-out of the 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds from 2012 to 2016, argues that it is the quality of the early education that matters and 'not the building it happens in'.

Beatrice Merrick, chief executive of Early Education, says, 'We know that some schools have developed great two-year-old provision, and with falling rolls in many primary schools, it may be that some have space they could repurpose.'

'They might want to build a "pipeline" of incoming children and start forging relationships with parents to encourage them to choose their school later down the line.'

But she warns that two-year-olds have 'distinct needs' which change significantly from when a child has just turned two to when they are turning three.

'There are infrastructure implications – they need lots of space to move around, including appropriate outdoor space, changing facilities and quiet space for



Some experts question whether schools are equipped to meet two-year-olds' distinct needs

sleeping. They also need staff who are knowledgeable about this age group and experienced at working with them,' she explains.

Two-year-olds 'are not smaller four-year-olds,' she adds. 'We wouldn't want to see schools taking two-year-olds unless they were confident that they could provide a suitably high-quality experience.'

'A MORE AFFORDABLE OPTION?'

Hemsall acknowledges that it is a 'big undertaking' to extend the age range of a school to include two-year-olds but 'not impossible'. However, he says he has seen schools go through the process and then ultimately not deliver for this age group, 'which is a shame.'

case study: Southern Road Primary School, Newham, London



'We started our provision for free-funded two-year-olds seven years ago, after a sharp decline in numbers saw our

nursery provision for three- and four-year-olds drop from three-form entry to one-form entry,' explains Ashfiya Bobat, assistant head teacher of Southern Road Primary School.

'In an attempt to raise the profile of the school, along with numbers – and budgets – as well as supporting two-year-olds from deprived backgrounds who were falling behind in communication and personal, social and emotional skills, we lowered the age range of the school to include two-year-olds. We also raised the offer in our three- and four-year-old rooms, from 15 hours to 30 hours of funded childcare a week in an attempt to entice more working parents. We did this with the support of the London Borough of Newham's early years team.'

'As a result of the changes, the school has been in a much better place over the past two years. We're at least 70 per cent full. Our Reception classes now start off with a solid 65 to 70 children and we make up the numbers for the

three-form entry throughout the year.

'The progress of the first cohort of two-year-olds, which are now in Year 2, has been phenomenal. Many of them started with extremely limited levels of language, but they have gone on to meet their expected levels of development in communication and language at the end of Key Stage 2. We are extremely proud of the confident learners they have become.'

'But we had to think creatively about the process at the time. We had a great team of early years staff and this initiative helped ensure that they didn't lose their jobs.'

'Fortunately, we had the physical space and only minimal changes were needed. We already had an empty nursery classroom with low-level toilets and we adapted a small room for nappy-changing facilities. There is no need for a sleeping area because the 24 two-year-olds that attend – 12 in the morning and 12 in the afternoon – only come for three-hour daily sessions, although there's a cosy area with cushions if they're tired.'

'The ratio is 1:4 and we have two Level 4 nursery nurses and one teaching assistant, and I oversee the

nursery – I'm a trained early years teacher. Our curriculum for two-year-olds focuses on the three prime areas of learning in the EYFS: communication and language, personal, social and emotional and physical development. It's about getting them active and using their gross motor skills and fine motors to develop the pincer grip and getting them to communicate through play.'

'Movement is key. Outdoors, we have climbing frames, a sensory garden, a mud kitchen and a bike track. They have free-flow access to the outdoor garden and allocated times where they can use the play equipment and the larger areas of open space.'

'With the changes to the entitlement for two-year-olds from September, we envisage even more demand, and although we don't have space for another two-year-old room, it might be that we move the children up to the three-year-old room quicker, to free up space for more two-year-olds.'

'One of the biggest challenges is finding the right staff. Staff development is key, particularly with the ever-changing early years market. It's a lot of work – but it's well worth it when you see the children progress.'

EYFS best practice in schools: two-year-olds



Ark Ayrton Nursery says it adapts its provision to meet the particular needs of its cohort of children

Merrick, though, says the proposed increase in the funding rate is likely to make two-year-old provision in schools a 'more affordable option'.

'Increasing the number of disadvantaged two-year-olds in schools is cost-effective because there are more funded children per school than in PVI's – and it could also mean better outcomes, if the quality of provision in schools is better than in PVI's, as Sandra Mathers' *Quality and Inequality* report showed a few years ago in regard to three- and four-year-olds.'

MORE INFORMATION

- 'Including two-year-olds in schools: a briefing for school leaders' (nurseryworld.co.uk): <https://bit.ly/45mykuV>
- '2 Children registered and providers by provider type' from 'Education provision: children under 5 years of age': Permanent data table (Gov.uk): <https://bit.ly/45cFnWL>
- *Education provision: children under 5 years of age: Reporting year 2022* (Gov.uk): <https://bit.ly/449deyB>
- *Childcare and early years provider survey: Reporting year 2022* (Gov.uk): <https://bit.ly/3RIAt5R>

From September, national average hourly rates for nursery settings will increase from £6 to an 'effective £7.95 per hour' for two-year-olds, and from April next year, the 15 hours entitlement will be extended to working parents of two-year-olds, with an average expected funding rate of £8.17 per child, as set out in the Government's proposed funding formula

Julie Ayrton, manager of Ark Ayrton Nursery in Portsmouth (see Case study on page 19), says the uplift in funding will have a 'massive impact' on the running of her two-year-old provision.

'Changes to funding causes significant challenges for nurseries, and it's no different in a school. It can be difficult to sustain the level of funding compared to what it costs to run the nursery and pay the staff, so any uplift is welcomed.'

CHALLENGE OF FLEXIBILITY

But despite the uplift in funding, Merrick does not foresee rapid change where more schools are taking in 'large numbers of under-threes'.

Despite a 25 per cent increase in the number of primary schools offering nursery places for funded two-year-olds, from 1,222 in 2018 to 1,546 in 2023, the number of two-year-olds in schools receiving the funded offer has not changed significantly in recent years and remains at around 12,000.

Also, the proportion of school-based

providers providing funded childcare to this age group decreased from 83 per cent to 78 per cent between 2021 and 2022.

Katie Oliver, director of Ark Start, the charitable arm of Ark Schools multi-academy trust, says Ark Start was set up to 'release the burden on primary heads of providing high-quality early years education onsite'.

Her division runs year-round, under-five provision in two academy schools, but two of Ark's 26 primary schools run their own provision for two-year-olds on a large scale – Ark Ayrton is one of them – and a handful of schools have small groups of two-year-olds in their pre-school rooms.

'They started delivering for this age group when the two-year-old entitlements were first introduced,' Oliver says. 'It was about providing free-school-meal children access to quality early years education and supporting them with school readiness and transition to primary.'

Oliver says that it is 'unlikely' that with all the pressure head teachers are under, the school system will be in a position to deliver the extended childcare entitlements 'at scale'.

Hempsall says that if more schools offer provision for twos, it could lead to expansion and a 'further polarisation' of the early years childcare market, with provision for working parents in affluent areas and schools serving disadvantaged children.

He says, 'Much of the PVI sector is geared towards supporting working parents to access their entitlements as and when they need them, to fit in with their working lives. Schools can be much less flexible.'

However, if schools can crack all-year-round provision – and if the Government fulfils its ambition set out in the Budget to provide primary school childcare provision for every family between 8am and 6pm by September 2026 – they could be in a 'much better place to be able to deliver flexible childcare', Hempsall says.

A DfE spokesperson comments, 'Schools play an important role in providing parents with childcare and we want to make sure that the cost of childcare is not a barrier for any parent that wants to work... We are investing hundreds of millions of pounds each year to increase the amounts we pay childcare providers, including schools that offer childcare for two-year-olds.' ■



'Cracking' all-year-round provision is key to schools becoming a viable option for a younger age group

case study: Ark Ayrton Primary Academy, Portsmouth



Ark Ayrton Primary Academy in Portsmouth has been offering two-year-old provision for over a decade. Originally operating as a council-run day nursery on the school site, it became part of Ark Schools in 2013, and switched over to offering two-year-old provision in term time only. From September 2023, the school officially merged with the nursery to become a 'two-plus' school, following a change to its age status.

'We've adapted and amended our model to meet the needs of the city,' explains the manager of Ark Ayrton Nursery, Julie Ayrton, who has been at the nursery since 2011. 'When full daycare for babies upwards was no longer in demand, we looked at where the most need was, and decided to focus on term-time provision for two-year-olds.'

'Our families have high levels of needs,' explains head of school Sophie Bennett-Acres, who oversees the nursery. 'According to the local NHS health report, the children in our community are at risk of getting to 16 overweight, not able to read fluently and are less likely to go into full-time employment, purely based on the postcode they live in.'

'We wholeheartedly believe in the value of getting children into school earlier. Our Key Stage 2 data consistently shows that those who came to us at two years old outperform their peers

nationally and the rest of the cohort that joined at a later stage,' she adds.

But there have been challenges along the way. 'Two years ago, we experienced a low birth rate,' Bennett-Acres says. 'Although we retained our Outstanding from the previous inspection, we just didn't have the footfall of children coming through the door. We'd committed to staffing costs but there wasn't the budget to pay for it. Also, because the two-year-old funding comes through the term after a child's second birthday, this means that there can be logistical difficulties with having staff in place.'

As of this September, the outlook is more positive. The 20-place nursery is full, with 38 two-year-olds, attending for either mornings or afternoon sessions, or both, 32 of whom are in receipt of the two-year-old funding. 'We have four members of staff in the two-year-old room – and there's room to expand provision, depending on demand. We also have 59 three- and four-year-olds in our pre-school room,' Ayrton says.

The two-year-old classroom has built-in toilets, nappy-change facilities and potties.

The classroom is set up as a continuous provision with arts and crafts, small world, story areas with snuggle areas and sleep mats for those that need a nap. 'Some children are with us all day, from 7.30am, if they access our low-cost wraparound care,' Ayrton says.

Outdoors, there's free-flow access

to the garden and a playground for gross motor development. 'We focus on the prime areas of learning in the EYFS. Many of our children find it difficult to regulate themselves, so we use zones of regulation throughout the whole school. Children use the colours to associate with the way they are feeling, which helps with their personal, social and emotional development and allows for a smoother transition,' Bennett-Acres says.

'We also link in with school data,' Ayrton says. 'If reading is flagged, we focus on storytelling and role play. If it's writing, we incorporate more mark-making.'

'We introduce the letter sounds in their play environment – we don't sit down and teach it, but we place letters in the tuff trays and introduce them to the sounds of the alphabet, using the Read Write Inc programme.'

Many of the children live in flats, so there is an emphasis on gross motor development. 'The classroom has its own free-flow garden and two large spaces for physical play,' Bennett-Acres says.

The next step is to create an onsite 'early years hub' where families can visit the health visitor for two-year-old checks or take their children to the dentist. 'Our vision is to create an early years centre of excellence,' Bennett-Acres says. 'We have the space for it and we want to open up opportunities for parents to get the support they need sooner.'