

A critical analysis of relevant policies on free childcare in four regions of the UK

1. introduction

Early education is the beginning of human lifelong learning, which plays a vital role in children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Qi, 2023). In the UK, the term "early basic stage" refers to the period of growth from birth to the age of 5, while "formal early education" specifically refers to the education provided by relevant institutions to children aged 3-4 years (Department of Education, 2024). Recent years have seen the continuous launch of numerous policies on free childcare services in various parts of the UK, demonstrating the region's growing concern for early childhood education.

British regional governments implement the relevant policy of free childcare service, an important social welfare plan, to support family education and alleviate the burden of childcare. This series of policies mainly serves families with children aged 9 months to 4 years and aims to provide financial support to early childhood education institutions so that more families can obtain high-quality and affordable early education resources (Busse, 2015).

This study will critically analyse the relevant policies of free childcare services in four regions of the UK: Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. This study will use the method of literature analysis to systematically explore the implementation status, challenges, and development trends of these relevant policies in different regions and provide targeted suggestions.

1.1 Introduction to Policies Related to Free Childcare Services

The British government provides the relevant policy of free childcare service, an important social welfare that aims to support family education and alleviate the burden of childcare. Families with children aged 9 months to 4 years are the primary target of this series of policies. By providing financial support to early education institutions (including nurseries, game groups, and family nurseries), it aims to provide free childcare services for eligible families (Busse, 2015).

Current policies summarize the implementation process as follows: After parents submit their own information and pass the strict qualification examination, parents can enjoy differentiated free childcare time according to their children's age: children from 9 months to 2 years old can enjoy 15 hours of free childcare service every week, while children from 3 to 4 years old can enjoy 30 hours of free education service every week. It is worth noting that, although the policy framework is generally consistent, there are still some regional differences in the specific details of policy implementation across the four regions of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland).

2.The background of policies related to free childcare is described below.

2.1 Why does the United Kingdom require free childcare services?

The emergence of free childcare service is the result of a variety of social, economic, and political factors. The formulation of relevant policies for this service reflects the deep consideration in British society for children's development, social equity, and the labour market. The main drivers include:

2.1.1 Early childhood development and social equity

Modern education research emphasizes the key role of early education in children's cognitive and social-emotional development. According to Sylva et al. (2004), high-quality early education can significantly reduce the negative impact of socio-economic background on children's development, promote the development of children's hand and brain function, and promote the growth of children. In addition, it can provide children from different socio-economic backgrounds with an equal starting point for education and narrow the gap of social inequality.

2.1.2 Economics of Female Labour Market Participation

The research shows that the relevant policies of free childcare service are an important means to promote women's career development. According to the data released by the British government in 2010, the average wage of women is only 78% of that of men (UK government, 2010). Therefore, women are more likely to withdraw from the labour market within their families. Combined with Blau and Currie's (2006) research, affordable, high-quality childcare services directly affect women's employment choices and labour market participation. This type of policy is not only helpful to support gender equality but also provides important human resources support for the economic development of the UK, giving more family members troubled by parenting problems the opportunity to return to the workplace.

2.1.3 Parental cost pressure and social welfare

The cost of childcare for British families continues to rise. According to the statistics of 2010, the average annual expenditure of every 1-4-year-old child in the UK is about 13014 pounds (The Guardian, 2010). Among them, parents in England

indicated in the report that the cost of childcare was 4576 pounds per year, an increase of 1.5% compared with previous years. At that time, the average annual salary of full-time employees in the UK was £25,879. Many families have experienced a heavy burden due to the rising cost of childcare, prompting some workers to resign from their jobs and return to their families to alleviate the pressure (Smithers, 2010). According to the ONS data, the cost of private childcare services increased by nearly 40% between 2010 and 2020 (The Guardian, 2010). The relevant policies of free childcare services have alleviated the economic pressure on families to a certain extent, reflecting the government's concern for family welfare.

2.1.4 Political and Social Background

Different regions of the UK have specific political and social backgrounds that influence the implementation of policies related to free childcare services.

Northern Ireland has just signed the 1998 Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement), ending decades of sectarian conflict in the region. Following the establishment of the chief executive of Northern Ireland, the government implemented various policies to enhance and expedite the promotion of social stability, demonstrating its deep concern for the welfare of children.

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 included a focus on the welfare of the people and the education of children. As a result, the Scottish Parliament introduced this benefit in 2002.

The Tony Blair government launched these policies in England because they believe that early education is the key to reducing social inequality and improving the

quality of the labour force (Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, the government has established a link between welfare and women's return to the workforce, enabling individuals to increase their working hours while simultaneously freeing up childcare resources.

Wales has always regarded "children's rights" as the core issue, trying to alleviate economic inequality through childcare services. The region's "flying start" plan (Gov. Wales, 2024) formally reflects this. It specializes in providing childcare services to help families living in poverty.

2.2 Purpose of Policies Related to Free Childcare Services

The implementation of policies related to free childcare services has both direct objectives and deeper social and economic impacts. These goals demonstrate the multifaceted value of the policy through comprehensive support for families, children, and society.

2.2.1 Direct objectives

The primary goal of the relevant free childcare service policies is to directly address practical issues like family childcare and early childhood education, which are particularly prevalent in contemporary society.

2.2.1.1: Provide affordable and high-quality early education.

For a long time, the high cost of childcare has been an important factor affecting family economic pressure. By providing free childcare services, the government can not only reduce the burden of childcare costs but also ensure that children can obtain high-quality educational resources at the early stage of development. Research shows

that early education significantly promotes children's cognitive ability, language development, and socialization. Therefore, such policies directly address the dual needs of families' economy and education (Qi, 2023)

2.2.1.2 Lessen the financial strain associated with family childcare

In many low- and middle-income families, the cost of childcare services accounts for 20% to 30% of family income (Smither, 2010). By reducing this expenditure, policies related to free childcare services have released the economic potential of families, enabling parents to allocate more resources to other key areas, such as housing, health, or education investment.

2.2.1.3 Ensure that children have access to early education resources.

The relevant policies for free childcare services also prioritize inclusivity and fairness, with the goal of addressing the income gap-induced inequality in children's educational starting points. By implementing such policies, the government can ensure that children from disadvantaged families receive equal educational opportunities as those from middle- and high-income families, thereby promoting the balanced development of individuals.

2.2.2 Indirect objectives

The free childcare policy's role in promoting social equity, economic vitality, and long-term national development reflects its more far-reaching impact, despite its direct focus on families and children.

2.2.2.1 Promoting social education equity

The policy of free childcare service is an important measure of achieving

educational equity. Unlike the traditional market-driven childcare service system, the government spearheads such policies to bridge the educational resource gap between social classes by providing universal service. After the implementation of relevant policies, children from low-income families can enter high-quality nurseries to avoid falling into the cycle of poverty due to insufficient starting conditions for a long time.

2.2.2.2 Encourage parents, particularly mothers, to pursue employment.

The uneven distribution of childcare responsibilities and the inconsistent average wages between men and women (UK Government, 2010) have made it difficult for many mothers to balance career development with family childcare and even forced some women to withdraw from the labour market. The relevant policies regarding free childcare services have effectively reduced the opportunity cost for mothers to return to the labour market by providing parents with economically feasible childcare options. This has not only increased the total income of households but also increased the overall productivity of the economy and promoted gender equality.

2.2.2.3. Lay the foundation for children's future development.

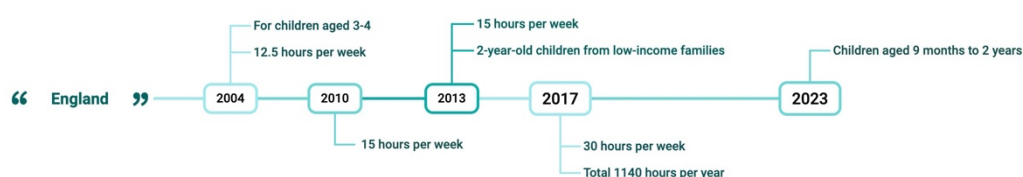
Early education is considered one of the most critical stages of personal lifelong development. The relevant policies of free childcare services have laid a solid foundation for children's future academic achievement and social adaptability by ensuring that children acquire comprehensive cognitive, social, and language skills at an early age (Qi, 2023). More importantly, this investment not only benefits individuals, but also reserves high-quality human capital for the long-term development of society.

2.2.3 Comparative perspective: the broad significance of policies

From the perspective of international comparison, the policy of free childcare is not only an innovative social welfare measure in the UK but also reflects the global consensus on the importance of early education. For instance, people regard the childcare service system in the Nordic countries as a successful model for promoting social equity and economic growth (Plantenga, 2009). The relevant policies of free childcare services in the UK draw on these models to some extent, but they also have their own unique practical background, such as solving the local poverty problem and improving the employment rate of women. Through these comparisons, we can have a more comprehensive understanding of the functions and significance of free childcare policies in different societies.

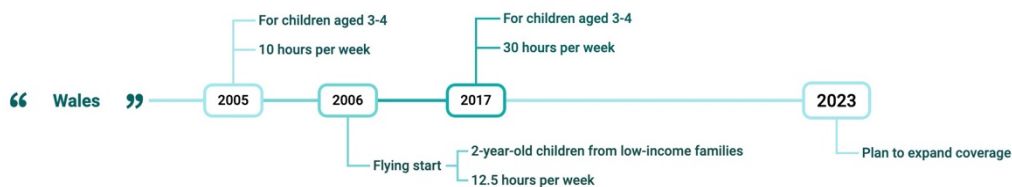
The direct goal of the policies related to free childcare services is to meet the actual needs of families and children, while its indirect goal focuses on broader social welfare and national development. In the design and implementation of the policy, it is obvious that early education is not only the starting point of personal development but also an important part of social equity and economic vitality. By balancing individual needs and social goals, the policy provides a practical way to solve a series of deep-seated problems in contemporary society.

3. Free childcare policies in four regions



3.1 England

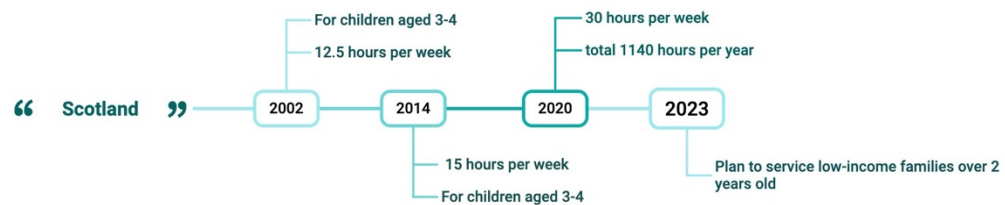
1. 2004- introduce free childcare service: provide 12.5 hours of free childcare service per week for all children aged 3 to 4.
2. 2010- expanded to 15 hours: increased to 15 hours per week, a total of 570 hours throughout the year.
3. 2013-2-year-old children pilot: provide free childcare services for 2-year-old children from low-income families 15 hours a week.
4. 2016- introduce the 30-hour policy: Eligible working parents can enjoy 30 hours of free childcare services per week, a total of 1140 hours throughout the year.
5. 2023- plan to further expand: it will cover children from 9 months to 2 years old, and it is planned to gradually expand to children of all ages, which is expected to be fully implemented in 2025.



3.2 Wales

1. 2005- 10-hour free childcare service: Wales provides 10 hour free childcare service per week for children aged 3 to 4.
2. 2006- flying start: for 2-year-old children from low-income families, 12.5 hours of childcare service is provided every week.
3. 2017- introduce the 30-hour free childcare policy: provide 30 hour free childcare services per week for eligible children aged 3 to 4.

4. 2023 and beyond - expand coverage: gradually plan to expand the coverage of childcare services, including providing support for more low-income families.



3.3 Scotland

1. In 2002, free childcare was implemented: 12.5 hours of free childcare services per week were provided, which is applicable to children aged 3 to 4.

2. 2014- increased to 15 hours: expanded to 15 hours per week for all children aged 3 to 4.

3. 2020- increase to 30 hours: the Scottish government decided to provide 30 hours of free childcare services per week for eligible families, with a total of 1140 hours throughout the year.

4. 2023 and beyond - further expansion plan: the government plans to continue to expand the coverage of childcare services, including increasing support for children under the age of 2 from low-income families.



3.4 Northern Ireland

1. 2000- pre-school education program: Northern Ireland provides 12.5 hours of

free childcare services per week through the pre-school education program, which is suitable for children aged 3 to 4.

2. 2015- increase support for low-income families: start a pilot project to provide childcare subsidies for 2-year-old children from vulnerable families.

3. 2020 and beyond - gradually expand the childcare policy: Northern Ireland is exploring measures to expand childcare support, but the progress is relatively slow.

The various policies of the four regions reveal that each region is continuously modifying and developing the service.

Its core goal is to provide residents with high-quality, affordable free childcare services so as to reduce the pressure on parenting families, liberate more of the labour force, and give family members responsible for childcare the opportunity to return to the labour market. It is worth noting that, although the four regions have different levels of development, their attention to poor families is obvious. Wales, serving as the core representative, established the "flying start" program in this region as a separate welfare project for impoverished families, ensuring school security for their children.

In addition to Northern Ireland, the progress of the policy, which focuses on extending the duration of free childcare services and broadening the age range of children receiving services, is leading to an increase in support for free childcare services in the other three regions. This reflects the three regions' investment in free childcare services.

But there are still obvious differences between the four regions. The first

difference is the variation in implementation years between the four regions. Out of the four regions, the English government has implemented the most changes to its service-related policies, indicating a faster pace of reform than other regions.

Additionally, each region's policy slightly differs in its focus on free childcare. It is noteworthy that the Northern Ireland government's description of the service is not particularly detailed. It only indicates in the policy that it will provide one-year service for school-age children, but the specific content is not particularly detailed.

5.Challenge

Currently, the service faces numerous challenges and issues with its relevant policies. Although England has the most relevant reports, the issues can also be found elsewhere. In this study, the author will mainly elaborate on the problems revealed in the current relevant reports in England.

Firstly, the primary reason for the difficulties in service development in the UK is a lack of funds. The lack of funds impacts all aspects of the service. The government's lack of funds will lead to a reduction in the number of free childcare places available at childcare institutions. Some childcare institutions have implemented increases in basic childcare fees or additional fees to mitigate the impact of this issue. Consequently, this issue has resulted in a scarcity of free childcare services. Some families said in the interview that the cost problem still exists, and they still have parenting pressure (Kellow, 2021).

Additionally, the financial crisis has significantly increased the pressure on childcare institutions. Free childcare services offer affordable childcare services to

many families, thereby increasing the willingness of these families to send their children to childcare institutions for early childhood education. However, there are restrictions on the number of children that the existing childcare institutions can recruit. In the UK, every nursery's teacher can only take care of five children at the same time (Foley, 2024). Therefore, in response to the growing number of children, childcare institutions must allocate additional funds to hire more teachers, ensuring that the quality of early care education remains high. Reports indicate that the government's limited funds continue to drive up the cost of childcare institutions. Due to the increasing demand for this service, many institutions are at risk of bankruptcy (Guardian, 2024).

Ultimately, this service grapples with the issue of teaching quality. The relevant policies aim to provide young children with high-quality early care education (Office, 2024). As previously mentioned, this service has increased the willingness of families to allow their children to participate in early care education, thereby attracting more students to childcare institutions. However, due to the limited number of teachers, it is necessary to expand the teacher team of childcare institutions if we want to enrol all the students enrolled in the school. Reports indicate that the current number of teachers is insufficient to accommodate the current number of children (Borrett, 2024). But excellent teachers need time to cultivate, and inexperienced teachers will undoubtedly lead to the reduction of teaching quality.

In general, the current problems faced by free childcare services mainly revolve around the lack of funds, which directly leads to the limited number of free places in

childcare institutions and the high-cost pressure of childcare institutions, and indirectly leads to a certain degree of parenting pressure on childcare families, the unstable teaching quality of childcare institutions, and the inability of children to obtain high-quality early care education.

6.proposal

The above reflection highlights the challenges facing free childcare services in the UK. The author offers pertinent recommendations based on the enhancement measures implemented by existing policies and the insights from the researchers themselves.

6.1 Supervise childcare expenses and allocate government funds reasonably

The primary concern is the issue of funding. Retrospection of previous policies related to free childcare services reveals that the funding issue has persisted for many years. However, the government's funding has a limit, necessitating a thorough assessment of the country's diverse conditions for the allocation of funds. As the most direct way to increase government funding for early education, it is believed that implementation issues must cause this issue.

In light of this situation, the author suggests strictly regulating the charging standards of childcare institutions while increasing service funds and prohibiting the practice of raising unreasonable fees without permission. Every three months, each institution will count the limited funds for early education based on the number of eligible children it recruits, and childcare institutions will receive average point-to-point cost subsidies. While these measures may not guarantee free childcare services

to every family enrolling in childcare education, they can guarantee a reduction in the usage of childcare institutions. Additionally, Northern Ireland has implemented measures to lower taxes for families with school-age children. The author suggests extending this measure to all regions of the UK to alleviate the burden of childcare (Berg, 2024).

6.2 Support preschool teacher training and facility development.

Currently, England offers project subsidies for the establishment of childcare institutions and the development of teachers (uk.gov.2023; uk.gov.2024), which are crucial for the development of high-quality childcare institutions and teams. However, the establishment of childcare institutions and the development of teachers must undergo a qualification examination, which necessitates a specific duration of learning. Therefore, although the adoption of this measure will not produce immediate results, it will provide more high-quality teaching labour for the childcare industry as time progresses.

6.3 Optimize the ratio of teachers and students.

At present, the British regulation on childcare services is that a teacher can only care for up to five young children at the same time (Foley, 2024). This is the latest change in the ratio of teachers in England, which increases the maximum number of children a teacher can care for from four to five. Such action has greatly reduced the expenditure of childcare institutions on teachers' costs, but it does not guarantee the quality of teachers accepted by children. The author believes that this change is feasible. Experienced teachers have a better understanding of children and are more

likely to take care of more at the same time. Then, we can conduct fixed-point experiments on this behaviour and assess the skills of teachers. Teachers who meet assessment criteria can accommodate more children. This approach will alleviate the financial burden while ensuring a certain level of education quality for children.

7. Conclusion

According to the future policy planning of the four regions in front of us for the free childcare service, the government firmly believes in the service's implementation and is determined to encourage more children to accept early care education.

Although the service has had many issues, it is believed that with government support and relevant policies, more children will be affected by the service and benefit from improved education.

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