



Out-of-school care services for children living in disadvantaged areas

Executive summary

Introduction

Out-of-school care for children is a vital component of the economic and social development of any area; it plays a particularly crucial role in disadvantaged areas and for disadvantaged groups and households who live in otherwise advantaged areas. The provision of out-of-school care can help address the social, economic and health issues that such disadvantaged households face, and support the social integration of excluded groups.

The main providers of out-of-school care are the public and the voluntary sectors, including community and parent-led organisations. However, in disadvantaged areas, it is unlikely that the receipt of fees will be sufficient to finance out-of-school care. It is important, therefore, to look at the options for providing such care and for maximising its benefits.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions commissioned a study to examine the development of out-of-school care services for children aged between five and 12 years living in disadvantaged areas in Europe. The research focused on six Member States: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom. From the research, six national reports were drawn up, along with 18 case studies and a consolidated report drawing together the findings of the national research.

The main objective of the research was to assess the impact of the different approaches implemented in each Member State and to establish which measures were successful, why they were successful, and what lessons they provide for policymakers and key actors.

Benefits of out-of-school care

The provision of out-of-school care services in disadvantaged areas benefits both parents and children in a number of ways. It enables parents to take up employment, improve their economic situation, balance their working and home lives, reduce their stress levels, boost their confidence and enhance their social interaction. Children benefit from such care directly, through greater educational attainment, improved opportunities for social development, better health, and having a safe, secure environment; they also benefit indirectly, by virtue of the improved economic circumstances of the household. Communities also benefit from the provision of out-of-school care: in addition to creating employment opportunities, it contributes to tackling poverty and problem behaviour.

If the value of out-of-school care is recognised, service providers and staff working in the sector will also benefit: it is more likely that services will be better regulated, which will raise standards and encourage investment in the sector. Moreover, staff will benefit from the professionalisation of the sector, in terms of enhanced career opportunities, investment in training and skills development and better pay and conditions.

Out-of-school care enables a range of organisations and sectors to meet their own aims and objectives. Trade unions have an interest in out-of-school care: it benefits workers, increases female participation in the labour market, improves career opportunities, reduces the stress levels of workers with children, brings health benefits and provides employment in disadvantaged communities. It is an opportunity for trade unions to enhance the employment conditions and career opportunities for out-of-school care staff.

Employers, because they operate in a competitive labour market and a global economy, need a high-quality, reliable and productive workforce; out-of-school care widens the pool of workers they can recruit from and can make it easier for them to retain staff.

The provision of out-of-school care can help governments meet their own strategic aims in terms of reducing poverty, raising educational attainment, improving economic development, furthering social inclusion, making communities safer, improving health, supporting work–life balance and addressing the longer-term challenges posed by demographic changes and global competition. In the absence of out-of-school care in disadvantaged areas, such benefits will be not be realised.

Key lessons and recommendations

Out-of-school care should be developed within a national strategic framework that encourages, enables and supports the development and provision of care services at a regional or local level by the public or voluntary sectors. It should form an explicit part of a national childcare strategy, with specific aims, objectives and targets that involve all strategic partners.

Out-of-school care must be affordable, which means that in disadvantaged areas it requires external support if it is to be sustainable. Such support may take the form of direct funding of the service, funding routed through the family or technical and practical support or – very often – a combination of all three approaches.

Out-of-school care services are more successful and have a greater impact if the local community is involved in developing and managing them. Such involvement ensures that services are responsive to the changing needs in the area. It can also assist social integration and help to develop a sense of community empowerment. To be able to contribute fully, parents may need capacity building and support; in turn, this will bring the additional benefits of skills development and greater self-confidence.

In disadvantaged areas, out-of-school care services should take a holistic approach to addressing the needs of children and families through joined-up assessment, service planning and delivery. Such an approach will involve a range of services, including health, family support, employment and training, and education and social services.

Out-of-school care must be readily accessible in disadvantaged areas. If it is to have an economic impact, it must be available all year round, during the hours that parents are at work; furthermore, it should be able to respond to changing work patterns. In rural areas, and for children with additional needs, group care may not be viable; to cater for such situations, the research gives good examples of care provided either in the child's or the carer's home.

Regulation of out-of-school care is important in order to ensure quality and consistency in provision. Such regulation relates to premises, equipment, staff ratios, facilities and the need for specific policies and procedures. Quality standards for out-of-school care should be developed to build on the legal requirements; such standards ensure that providers are encouraged to continually strive to improve their services.

To maximise the benefits of out-of-school care in disadvantaged areas and for disadvantaged groups, policymakers should consider:

- the strategic priorities for developing out-of-school care;
- the current profile of out-of-school care in their country;
- the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in existing provision and the opportunities for developing it;
- the role of existing partners and potential future partners in the strategic development of out-of-school care in disadvantaged areas;
- the appropriate target for support: disadvantaged areas, disadvantaged groups and households, or a combination of both;
- the required regulatory framework, and how to ensure that it be established;
- developing the workforce to deliver appropriate care;
- strategies to monitor and improve quality;
- how to measure qualitative and quantitative impacts and use this information to plan future service delivery.

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Information on Foundation research into childcare is available at:
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